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By **BRETT HALLIDAY**

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By **MICHAEL AVALLONE**

THE PRICE OF DEATH

A suspense novelet
By **LEO P. KELLEY**

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NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

DECEMBER, 1971
VOL. 30, NO. 1

The Postman Brought Murder

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Beauty and sudden death were walking hand in hand in that night of horror—and Mike Shayne, caught in the middle of a trap baited with Murder, took a last desperate chance to earn a strange fee —and stay alive at the same time!

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THE NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

Beauty and sudden death were walking hand in hand in that night of horror — and Mike Shayne, caught in the middle of a trap baited with Murder, took his one last chance to live.

by **BRETT HALLIDAY**



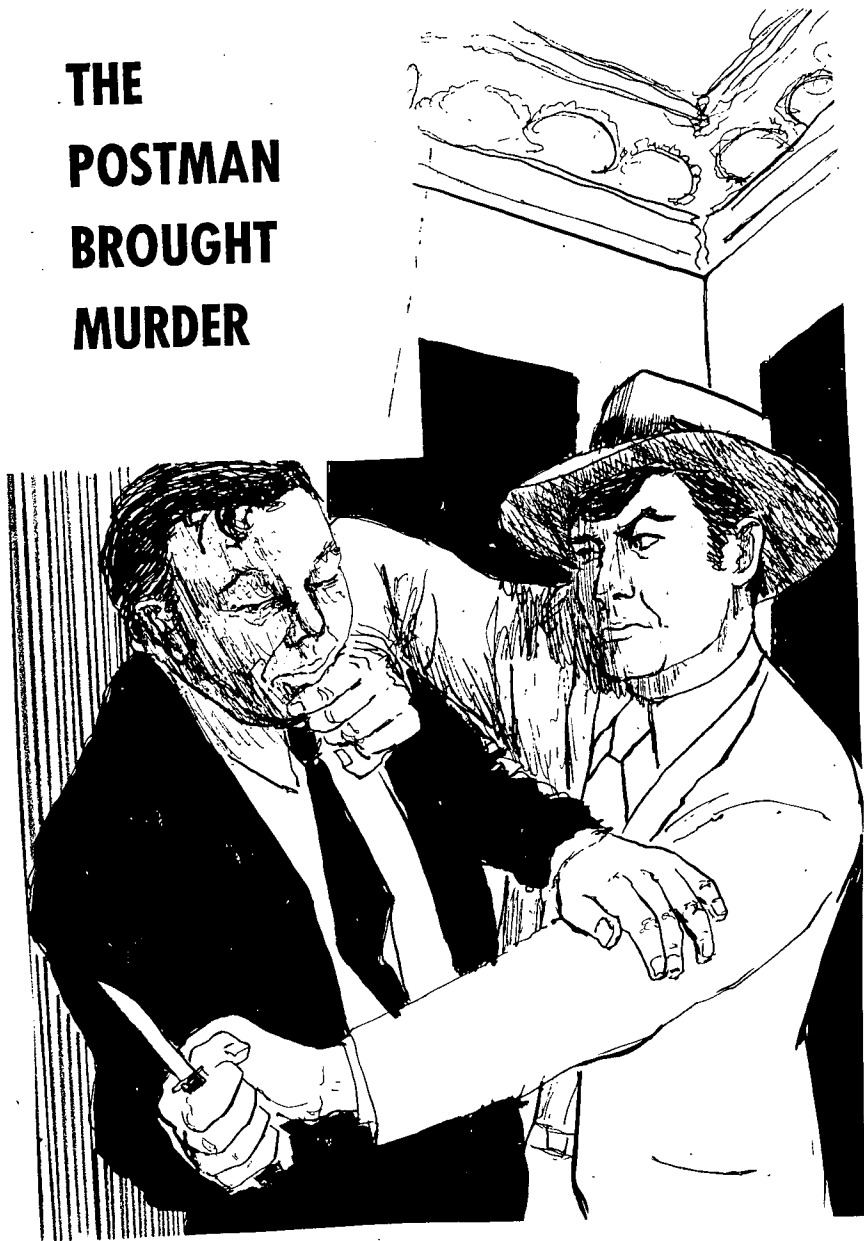
“YOU’D BETTER be sure,” Mike Shayne said. “You had just better be.” The big Miami private eye turned his car into the street of modest concrete block and stucco homes on the city’s northwest side.

“Right over there, third from the corner on the left,” the man riding with him pointed. “Of course I’m sure, Mike. There’s a hit set for later tonight. Sack 4741. Just like I told you. They passed the word earlier today so all of us would be there and ready.”

“How in hell did they get that sack number?” Shayne said. “I only had it myself less than two hours ago. They’ve just got to have a spotter on the other end.”

“Sure they do,” the man with him said. “This bunch has spotters all

THE POSTMAN BROUGHT MURDER



over the country. Maybe all over the world. They're organized like the F.B.I., only on the other side of the law. Every time they know what they want and they take it just as smooth as silk. Never lift the wrong sack. Never miss the right one."

"I know," Shayne said. "My bosses on this case say it's a two hundred and fifty million dollars a year heist. That is on the people they insure alone. Overall it makes even the Mafia families look like kids pitching pennies. Anyway, we ought to be able to tail this one. That is, if nothing goes wrong."

"I don't see how it can, Mike," the other said. Shayne had pulled up in front of one of the houses. "Come on in and have a beer. We've got plenty of time to kill."

"Okay," Shayne said. "I don't mind if I do." The second man was on the big detective's payroll on a temporary basis. They'd worked together in the past. "You still drink that imported stuff, Smitty?"

"Sure do," Nick Smith laughed and took out his door key. "Far as I'm concerned it's the world's only beer that's fit to drink."

He unlocked the door and shoved it open. "After you."

"You're in the door," Shayne said. "Go right ahead."

He didn't know it, but he'd just saved his own life.

Smitty stepped into his own living room.

The man standing flattened against the wall of the living room to the

right of the entrance put his gun to Smitty's head and pulled the trigger. No challenge, no warning, no hesitation. He just pulled the trigger.

The gun was a twenty-two target automatic, a Woodsman, with a long barrel made even longer by the silencer on the end. It made less noise than a pin-stuck balloon, but the hollow point, high velocity .22 long rifle slug punched through Smitty's skull and scrambled the brains inside just as effectively as if it had been a thirty-eight.

Anybody else but Mike Shayne would have taken the second shot right in the temple. The big detective lived by instinct—honed by years in one of the world's most dangerous professions.

He saw the blue steel pressed to Smitty's head and knew, before he had time to realize that he knew it, that whoever held the gun would have heard them talking. He'd know there were two men at the door.

Shayne let himself drop to his knees, and the second shot went through empty air where the big man's head had been a split second before.

Shayne was on his knees across the threshold with Smitty's body on the carpeted floor in front of him. The killer was against the wall to his right and the partly opened door blocked any movement to the left. A man on his knees is in just about the worst possible position to make a fight. He can't kick, has absolutely no mobility, and will pull himself off

balance if he attempts any violent movement. He can't even swing an effective punch against any target not directly to his front.

The big man did the only thing he possibly could. He swung his body to the right and grabbed at the ankles of the man standing pressed to the wall. One powerful yank and the killer fell heavily, thrashing his arms and dropping the gun.

He got one leg loose and launched a vicious kick into Mike Shayne's face. If the kicker had been properly braced the kick would have broken Mike Shayne's neck. As it was the shoe heel tore open the redhead's cheek and slammed him back away from the man.

Both of them twisted on the floor like a couple of fighting tomcats, trying to get into position and at the same time groping for the gun. Shayne hit the butt with the heel of his hand and knocked the weapon clear across the room. Then he snatched for the big forty-five in his own belt holster.

Shayne hadn't time to get out his gun. The man he was fighting was a pro himself. He got up on his knees and a switchblade knife, its blade flickering menacingly in the late afternoon sunlight that slanted in the windows, seemed to blossom in his hand. Then he launched himself forward in a sort of slithering dive with arm out at full length and the knife ripping for Shayne's gut. The wicked steel ripped a cut in the front of the big detective's jacket.



It was close. It was very close indeed.

Shayne grabbed for the man's knife hand with his own left and caught it for a second. He swung a looping right at the man's head and connected but failed to knock him out. The man rolled clear, got to a sitting position and looped his arm back to throw the knife.

Mike Shayne again did the only thing he could. He got his own gun out and fired from a prostrate position.

The heavy slug took the man in the mouth and blew out the back of his head. Some of his brains made a

blue-white mess on the wall where the slug went into the plaster.

II

MIKE SHAYNE looked at the two dead men on the floor of the room in front of him. Then he got very carefully to his feet. He didn't try to search the house. If the killer hadn't been alone, Shayne would have known it by now. The fight would have drawn another man.

Shayne pulled his handkerchief out and applied it to his face where the killer's leather shoe heel had marked him. He didn't look at the bodies again. Brain-shot men stay dead. He did go to the window, but either the closed windows of the air-conditioned house had muffled the shots or any neighbor who heard had thought they were a car back-firing. Nothing stirred on the street.

He went into the bathroom of the two-bedroom home and washed his face. He applied iodine and an adhesive pad to the cut after it stopped bleeding.

Then he went into the kitchen. That was where he knew Nick Smith kept his liquor — and Mike Shayne needed a drink.

He found himself a bottle of bourbon and poured half a tumbler full. The big man tossed it down with one long swallow after another, rinsed the glass and took a small swallow of tap water for chaser.

The liquor hit his stomach with an impact all its own and a grateful

warmth began to spread out from that center. He poured another two fingers into the glass and sat down at the kitchen table.

Mike Shayne had some hard thinking to do.

At the time of his death Smitty had been working for the Miami detective for better than a month. Shayne had needed an operative to infiltrate the operations of a gang and bring him some information. Smitty had just moved back to Dade County after some years in South America. He wasn't known to any of the local hoods and had seemed like an ideal choice. Apparently that had been a mistake. He'd been spotted and killed.

The case had been begun about six weeks before, when Mike Shayne had gone up to New York to see the head of a major national insurance firm for which he had handled many cases over the years.

That trip of itself was unusual. Mike Shayne usually did business with the vice-president who handled South Florida contracts for the company. That dignitary had a Biscayne Boulevard suite of offices in downtown Miami not far from Shayne's own Flagler Street office.

This time they hadn't wanted to handle it that way. Shayne had been asked to fly up to New York to see the top man in person. He wasn't to go to the executive offices in the insurance company's building either.

The meet was secret and it was held in an East Side apartment that had

security guards in the lobby and a couple of Gotham private eyes to escort Shayne to the place itself.

All very hush-hush, top secret classified. At the time it had amused Mike Shayne. He had developed a cynical disbelief in the effectiveness of this sort of elaborate precaution.

Th insurance man—his name was Evan Hargrove and he was a millionaire many times over—took the whole thing seriously indeed.

"You don't realize what you're up against, Mr. Shayne," he said over a glass of top-brand French brandy.

"I've managed to handle every assignment you've given me so far," Mike Shayne said. He didn't say "sir" though most other men would have.

"I know," Hargrove had said. "This one makes the rest of them look simple though. You haven't any idea."

"If it's that bad you better call the police," Shayne said. "After all I'm just one man."

"We aren't fools," Hargrove said. He said it as if he resented Shayne's attitude. "We already have the police on this. New York and Miami police. Local police in a dozen other cities. Two of the top national agencies. Even the F.B.I. They have not been able to do the job. Not any of them. Oh, they've brought us some information, spotted some of the small-fry concerned, even got us a fair idea of how the thefts are being handled."

"But not the name of the head man behind it all," Shayne said quietly.

This time Evan Hargrove looked at the Miami detective with a very real respect. "Exactly. That's the one thing we have to know—and the one thing they can't get even close to. You see all of them, even the national outfits, have one fatal weakness when it comes to handling this case. They're big. They have to be of course. You need a lot of people to police even a medium sized city. Their size makes them effective.

"By the same token the crowd we're after is big too. This is no penny-ante racket. The take runs into hundreds of millions annually as far as our company alone is concerned. With all its ramifications it may even involve billions on an international scale. We don't begin to have an idea."

"Anybody that fat can buy information," Shayne said.

"That's it," Hargrove agreed. "We know they have people inside every major police force in the country in their pay, perhaps even in my own office. That's why we're meeting here. Somehow they know every move we make.

"On the other hand, who can they buy in your organization, Mr. Shayne? Nobody. You haven't any organization. You can operate secretly for just that reason."

"That's all very well," Shayne said. "I can also be eliminated easy enough once they spot me. They

don't have to read my mail. An outfit that size will just have me killed, and you and I both know it."

"You've pretty well proved your ability to take care of yourself in the past," Hargrove said. "As you just reminded me a couple of minutes back. Besides, you aren't going to be on the case that long. I have an idea that might work to locate the brain back of this deal. That's what I want you to follow through on, that and nothing else."

"First you better tell me what it's all about," Shayne said.

"It's theft from the mails at airports," Hargrove said. "Very special thefts. Nothing is taken but sacks of registered mail, and then only those full of negotiable securities or something else equally valuable. Sometimes they get a hundred thousand dollars or more in one sack. They know which ones to take too."

"Bust the mail handlers," Shayne said. "But I guess you already thought of that."

"Of course we did. The men who handle the sacks at the airports have to hand them to somebody. We know which ones do it and who they give the sacks to. If we arrest them, they just get replaced. This gang buys postal employees and airline people like peanuts and popcorn. It's the guy who really gets the loot we're after. So far we haven't got him."

"With all those cops on the job —" Shayne started, but he was interrupted.

"Somebody was bound to get a lead," Hargrove said. "Sure. We think five did. One is in Brazil living high on the hog. He won't come home and he won't talk. Three have vanished. Gone. No trace at all. The fifth was an F.B.I. man. We found his body floating in the Hudson a week ago. His friends are real eager to know how he got there."

"If you find me floating," Mike Shayne said, "send me south for burial. Seriously now, what makes you think I can do any better? I'm no match for the F.B.I. or even the New York cops."

"I said I had a plan," Hargrove said. "We're going to send through one item they are going to have to hit. A piece of jewelry—the Esperance Diamond."

"That's interesting," Shayne said.

"That's right, Shayne. The million-dollar diamond. Whoever he is, his contacts will tell him about it. He'll hit that shipment for sure. He can't possibly resist the idea."

"We'll take all the normal precautions so nothing will look odd, but we count on the gang to snatch that particular mail sack at Miami International Airport. We never stopped them before when they wanted something, and we won't now."

"That's where you come in. You follow that stone. When it's taken you stay with it. We don't care how you do it, Shayne. In effect you'll have a license to kill if that's what you feel you have to do. The only

thing that counts this time will be results. Can you do it?"

"You've tried following one shipment before?"

"Yes. They shook our people every time. That's why we call you in. This time it has to work."

"There's only one Esperance Diamond," Shayne said. He got up and walked over to the big teevy and turned it on. He got the volume up until the room boiled with sound.

Then he went over to Evan Hargrove and spoke close to his ear.

"If your place is bugged," Shayne said, "that noise will scramble what I want to say. There's just one thing that might work. Now listen closely. I'll only say this once."

III

THE DOORBELL rang in Nick Smith's kitchen. The buzzer itself was only a few feet above Mike Shayne's head on the wall and the sudden ring brought him out of his chair and reaching for the gun in its belt holster, all thoughts of the interview with Hargrove temporarily driven out of his mind.

The big man moved swiftly into the living room area. The two bodies were still sprawled on the rug. The windows were closed as the house was air-conditioned and venetian blinds were partly closed to keep out the afternoon sun. Shayne doubted if anyone looking in the windows could spot the dead men easily.



He doubted even more that anyone who had done so would ring the doorbell calmly.

It rang again.

Shayne kept his hand on his gun and stood close to the door.

"Who's there?" he asked.

There was no answer from outside the house. Shayne tried again. "Who is it?" Still no answer. The big man waited a long minute. In the closed room it would have been difficult to hear footsteps outside, but he tried without result.

Whoever had been ringing the bell must have gone away when there was no answer. Shayne finally opened the door a couple of inches. There was no one on the step. His own car was at the curb. Down the street a neighbor was

shattering the afternoon calm with the peculiarly horrible clamor of a power lawn mower. Otherwise not even a dog was stirring.

The detective decided it must have been a paper boy making his collections or a peddler of some sort. He closed the door again and started back to where he had left his drink on the table.

As he stepped through the door into the kitchen instinct flashed a warning — just a split second too late.

Shayne felt the cool steel muzzle of the gun touch skin just under and behind his right ear.

He heard the voice say: "That's it, buster. You be a real lover now and make like a wooden Indian. Don't even move a splinter, see?"

It was a female voice, young and hard and very sure of itself. It wasn't the sort of voice likely to belong to a woman who would panic or who could be caught off guard. The gun was steady as a rock. A shot fired into that part of the head couldn't help being fatal.

Mike Shayne stood perfectly still.

He felt a hand flip open the front of his jacket and then the heavy weight of his own forty-five Colt's lifted as the big gun was eased out of the holster.

The woman's voice spoke again. "All right, lover. That should make sure the odds stay on my side, just in case you feel like getting tough. I can belly shoot you with that cannon of yours as easy as a man could.

Now go on over to the table and sit down and finish your drink."

"You don't figure to kill me now?" Shayne asked.

"Don't be silly, lover. If I had, you'd never have known what hit you. Now go do as you're told and let me ask the questions."

Mike Shayne did as he'd been told. He went back to the table and sat down. He was hoping she'd sit across the table from him where he could tip it into her lap if he decided to make a fight of it. She was too smart for that. Instead she pulled the other chair away from the table over against the wall next to the sink where she was out of the line of doors and windows. She sat down facing the back of the chair with her wrists braced on the back, holding the detective's big gun. The little twenty-five automatic she'd stopped him with was back in the big leather shoulder bag she wore.

Shayne got his first look at her then. She wore a black pants suit, plain and expensive, penny loafers that wouldn't hamper her movement, and the black leather shoulder bag on a long strap. Her hair was black and lustrous and a little more than shoulder length. Instead of a hat she wore a sort of bright red turban wound about her head. It was the one real touch of color she wore.

Her face was a long triangle, with high firm cheekbones and a small slash of red-lipped mouth. The chin was pointed and strong and there was the thin white line of a knife

scar under the makeup across her left cheek. She was slender, but well curved in the right places.

Shayne couldn't begin to tell her age. It might have been anywhere from a battle-hardened twenty-five to a well-preserved and sensual sixty. That part wasn't important anyway.

What was important was that she had all the controlled ferocity and the skilled, quick-witted alertness of the killer on the living room floor—or of Shayne himself. This one was a professional.

"Have a good look, lover," she said scornfully.

"You're worth looking at," he said with some genuine admiration.

"Flattery gets you nothing today," she told him. Then, suddenly and with heat: "Why did you kill Charlie, lover? Why?"

"I suppose that's Charlie in there on the rug?" Shayne said. "He played rough. He killed my friend. He was going to kill me. What did you want me to do, challenge him to a game of Indian hand wrestling? I didn't have time. Now suppose you tell me what Charlie was doing here at all?"

"I said I'd ask all the questions," she said. "You want me to think you were just an innocent bystander defending himself. Well, what were you doing with the rod I just took off you? I suppose that's what got Charlie?"

Shayne sat there and looked at her, locking his gaze on her two

brown eyes. Those eyes looked soft, but they didn't flick away.

"You aren't the first to try to stare me down," she said. "It'll be a stand-off. Why not just tell me who you really are?"

They both sat silent. When it was obvious he wasn't going to answer, she shrugged.

"I can shoot you and then go through your wallet. I will too if you make me. Why not do it the easy way? You're too fine a hunk of man to waste on mullet bait."

Shayne decided she meant what she said.

"I use the gun in my business," he said. "I'm a private detective. My name's Mike Shayne. If you've been around Miami long, you've heard of me."

"Yeah," she said. "I've heard of you. So what's a big shamus like you doing here? Let's get back to the basics, lover. Why did you kill Charlie?"

"I told you the truth," Shayne said. "I just happened to get caught in the middle. Smitty, the guy who of mine. I hadn't seen him in years until I ran into him downtown today. He asked me to come back day. He asked me to come back here for a drink with him."

"Go on, lover. Go on."

"That's it. All of it. I didn't know Charlie from a Boston bus driver. When we came in here Charlie killed Smitty. Then he tried to kill me. Like I said, it wasn't any time to play patty-cake. What would you

have done in my place? What's this Charlie hombre to you anyhow?" Shayne asked.

She kept watching him. "That's a nice story," she said, "but it doesn't wash so good, lover. No innocent bystander goes ahead and kills people and then sits down for a drink. That's what you did. If you'd called the cops, they'd be here by now, so you didn't do that. You sat down for a drink."

"I was shaken up," Shayne said. It didn't sound very convincing even to him.

Obviously, the woman didn't buy it at all.

"You was shook up in a pig's ear," she said. "I've heard about how easy Mike Shayne gets shook up. I think you know what Charlie was doing here. I think this Smitty was working for you."

"I said I hadn't seen Smitty in years."

"And the wolf told Little Red he was her grandmother. You got teeth like a wolf, Mike. I think I better take you and turn you over to somebody else higher up on this ladder than me."

"Maybe he'll have sense enough to know the truth when he hears it," Shayne said.

"Don't you worry about that, lover," she said. "You worry about this, though. Mr. Jay catches you telling one lie, just one little lie, and you'll have breakfast in hell with Charlie and Smitty in the morning. You will for sure."

IV

THEY RODE AWAY from Smitty's place in Mike Shayne's own car, with the big private detective himself at the wheel. The woman had his forty-five automatic inside the shoulder bag with the muzzle rammed hard against his right side under the ribs and her finger on the trigger. At that point-blank range the hand-loaded three hundred grain hollow point slug would have torn him in half, and Shayne knew it.

He also knew she was perfectly capable of pulling the trigger at the slightest suspicious move on his part. He drove as carefully as a teenager taking his first driver's license test.

"That's good, buster," she said. "Turn where I tell you and don't attract attention from anybody."

The fact that he was driving and so would know exactly where they were going sent a cold chill up Shayne's backbone. It meant that she didn't care if he knew where he was going. That in turn meant she didn't expect him to leave again alive.

The route took them over one of the causeways to Miami Beach and then to an area of expensive homes fronting on Biscayne Bay from one of the small islands abutting the main Beach strip:

The house they were headed for was set in grounds of at least a couple of acres, surrounded by a high rock wall and with big wrought iron gates. There was a guard who

looked like a common hoodlum at the gates to let them in. The drive curved through heavy ornamental shrubbery to an old house sitting facing Biscayne Bay.

The woman made Shayne park in front and then took him around the side and in by a kitchen door. The kitchen was big and furnished expensively in old style ranges and appliances, all first quality but twenty years out of date.

Mike Shayne got the impression that the place hadn't been occupied for some time. There had probably been a caretaker, but the place had a musty, un-lived-in smell to it.

There was another man in the kitchen sitting in his shirt sleeves playing solitaire with an old pack of cards. The shirt was very "mod" with wide stripes of purple, buff, and shocking pink. The face over the unbuttoned collar was narrow boned, blue-jawed and feral, the face of a big-town hood.

The woman with Shayne conferred briefly with this man and then they unlocked a door in the kitchen wall and motioned the big man to go through.

"Leave this door alone, Shayne," the woman said. "There'll be a gun on our side of it all the time. Just sit loose. We'll come for you when you're wanted."

"You tell him, Nita," the hood in the awning striped shirt said and laughed.

Then the door closed and Mike Shayne heard the heavy padlock be-



ing put through the hasp and snapped locked.

Right at first he could see nothing at all. He was in the heavy, oppressive blackness of a completely enclosed and windowless space. The air was old and musty and thick with the smells of cobweb and layered dust and something else he couldn't quite place at first.

Some small animal, mouse or lizard, scittered its claws on the stone flooring off to his left somewhere.

Outside of the woman taking Shayne's gun nobody had bothered to frisk Mike Shayne. The normal contents of his pockets were undisturbed.

They included a tried and razor honed Case XX two-bladed pocket knife that was both tool and a weapon of sorts. Shayne took the knife out of his pocket now and slipped it

inside the top of the elastic stretch sock on his right foot. They might miss it there when they finally got around to searching him.

After that he took out his pocket cigarette lighter and flicked the flame into life. An ancient unshielded light bulb with a chain pull was almost directly overhead. The bulb was a small one but the yellowed light let Mike Shayne see where he was. The room was small, stone-floored and lined with shelves. There were other shelves jutting out from the walls. Most of them were empty but a few were not.

Shayne looked again and then broke out in a broad grin. They'd locked him into the old mansion's wine cellar. Some of the shelves still held old, dust coated bottles, vintages which time had made legendary. What a place to put a prisoner! At least he wouldn't die of thirst in there.

In other respects, though, the room really was a logical place for a prisoner. It was windowless and the only door opened into the kitchen where the guard was sitting.

At first Shayne was worried about ventilation. Then he realized that air was moving in the room. A sheet metal square pipe came in one wall at the corner and turned sharply upward to disappear through the ceiling. It puzzled the detective until he realized that it must be a vent to carry hot air to the upper floors from a furnace somewhere on the bottom floor. He examined it care-

fully until he was sure he could break it apart at the joints where the separate pieces were soldered together. For the moment he left it as it was.

He found a bottle of his favorite brandy and worried the cork out with his teeth. A long drink warmed his stomach.

After that he pulled out the light and sat down in the dark. He was directly opposite the door and against one of the shelves which still held some filled bottles. He left them alone though. He didn't even take a second drink from the brandy bottle.

Shayne was thinking hard. The Esperance Diamond, one of the world's most famous stones, was due in the Miami International Airport late that night in one of the registered mail sacks coming in from New York. It had been shipped by mail instead of traveling under guard in an armored truck ostensibly so that it would pass unnoticed by potential thieves.

Mr. Hargrove of the insurance combine had been sure, as had Mike Shayne, that the gang they were after would learn of the shipment. Shayne had planted Smitty on the mail handling gang at the airport precisely so that he would get the tip if the gang planned a hit tonight. Smitty, before he died, had confirmed the fact that they did.

Mike Shayne had been prepared, with the aid of some very special equipment, indeed, to stay on the

tail of the fabulously valuable jewel until it reached the head man behind the whole operation.

That is, he had been prepared until the woman, Nita, had put the gun to his head and brought him to this wine cellar. He sat in the dark and cursed himself for a fool. She'd rung the doorbell to attract his attention, then slipped quietly around and let herself in the back door to the kitchen. He'd then walked into the trap like any tyro. He should never have assumed that the killer called Charlie had operated alone.

Well, there was no sense crying over spilled milk now. What was done was done.

The big man pulled a bottle out of the rack behind him and hurled it into the far corner of the wine cellar where it smashed with a crash on the stone floor. Then he began to groan as loud as he could.

After a moment he heard the guard from the kitchen at the door. "What's going on in there?" His voice was muffled by the heavy door.

Mike Shayne shook one of the rows of shelves till the bottles clattered and clanked. He groaned some more.

He heard the snap of the padlock, and then the door into the kitchen swung open. Shayne threw his third bottle. It was a quart of wine in a heavy glass bottle and he hurled it as hard as he could right

at the head of the man in the doorway.

The bottle took the guard squarely on the forehead and staggered him back, half stunned, into the kitchen.

Mike Shayne followed the bottle in a lunging rush. His big right hand smashed the guard's chin and completed the knockout.

He got all the way into the kitchen itself before he even saw the three other men. They were big and tough and much like the one he'd knocked down and they closed in on the big detective with the controlled ferocity of professional fighting men.

One of them got hold of each arm and the third cocked back his fist and slammed Shayne in the face hard enough to rattle his teeth and jar him dizzy.

Shayne reacted by sheer instinct and brought up his knee at the attacker's groin. The blow only half landed but the man fell back a pace and Shayne brought up a big foot and kicked the fellow in the stomach hard enough to knock him clear across the big kitchen. He hit the table, fell across the top and went down with a crash when one of the table legs splintered.

At the same moment Shayne brought his kicking foot back and out to the right as hard as he could. The heel of his heavy shoe took the man at his right across the ankle. The fellow yelled and let go of Shayne's arm. He hopped unsteadily on one foot, yelling in pain.

The big redhead flexed his suddenly freed right arm and launched a vicious judo chop with the caloused edge of the powerful hand at the hopping man's neck. The blow landed solidly and the hood suddenly lost all interest in his bruised ankle. His jaw dropped open, his hands flew out convulsively, and then he went down flat on his face.

That was when the roof fell in on Mike Shayne.

The fourth man let go of the detective's arm, snatched an old twelve inch iron skillet off the stove and brought it down full force on the top of the detective's head.

Smashing, blinding pain. Then merciful darkness and peace.

When Mike Shayne began to regain consciousness it was minutes later. His arms were tied behind his back with clothesline which was then tied a dozen times around trunk and arms. His ankles were hobbled with another short length of the clothesline so that when they pulled him to his feet he could stand and take short steps only. His head was an inferno of pain.

Two of the men hauled him to his feet. Then a third hauled off and landed a smashing haymaker that knocked him down again.

Then they repeated the process.

The third time they tried to hoist him up, Shayne made his knees stay limp. He was down on the floor again before he could be hit this time.

One of the men kicked him in the ribs instead.

Given time, they very well might have beaten the big man to death. Fortunately they weren't given the time.

The woman Nita came back into the kitchen.

"What the hell is going on here?" she asked.

They told her.

"Well, stop your fun," Nita Nolan said. Her tone was as impersonal as if she'd found them stamping a rat or a snake to death instead of a man.

"Wipe some of the blood off him and take him into the library. Mr. Jay wants a talk with this hero—and he wants it right now."

They threw a pitcher of water into the big redhead's face in lieu of washing him off and then hoisted him up to his feet again. He let himself hang limp until he decided they were going to let him walk instead of knocking him down again. Then he planted his feet, but when they let go his arms he almost fell down again anyway.

Even as strong a man as Mike Shayne could take only just so much beating.

"I need a drink," he said.

"Damned if I don't think you do, lover," Nita said. "You're going to need your strength to talk to Mr. Jay. Give him a swig, Rocky."

One of the hoods got a bottle from the wine cellar and broke the neck on the iron stove. It was wine.

Shayne took a good three swallows from the jagged neck, trying not to cut his mouth on the sharp glass. That amused the hoods. They had a good laugh about it.

After that two of them took his arms and made him follow Nita out of the kitchen.

They went through what had been a butler's pantry though the shelves and cupboards were now bare and then across a dining room with a table that could seat twenty guests at need. That and the big entrance hall beyond were only about half furnished. Mike Shayne decided he was right in thinking the house had not been lived in for a long time.

The library across the hall had empty shelves and a big rug on the floor. Somebody was sitting in a chair by the windows. Afternoon had become evening. It was dusk outside and the room was full of shadows.

"Here he is, Mr. Jay," Nita Nolan said.

V

THE MAN IN the chair shifted his position so that he could look directly at the big detective. Even at the distance of ten feet, and in that heavily shadowed room, Mike Shayne could feel the impact of those eyes.

It reminded him of a big serpent, a boa or a cobra, looking at a potential living meal brought for his contemplation. The eyes were hooded, jet, serpentine, alive with evil.

Mr. Jay wasn't a big man physically. Even in shoes with heavy heels he wouldn't have stood more than five foot six or six and a half inches. He was small-boned and his flesh looked soft from too much easy living, rich food and complaisant women. In a fight he couldn't have stood up to Nita Nolan for thirty seconds, let alone any one of them in the room.

In spite of that all of them seemed to cower before him.

All of the power of the man was in the eyes.

When they fastened their gaze on Shayne's face it was almost as if a physical force had been applied. The big man put his shoulders back and returned that look without dropping his own eyes.

If that feat surprised Jay he managed not to show it.

"Has he been searched?" The voice was as vibrant with evil as the eyes.

"Nita took his gun," the man Rocky said. "We didn't have time for more."

"By the looks of you all you had time to get your ears beat back," Jay said. "Search him now."

Two of the men frisked Shayne thoroughly and professionally. They got his wallet and all the contents of his pockets. One of them found the clasp knife he had hidden in his sock. They offered the things they had found to Jay who looked at them indifferently.

"Put that junk back in his pock-

ets," he said indifferently. "All but the knife, that is. Nita, you know what I want. Get it for me."

The woman swiftly unfastened Shayne's belt and removed the big silver and copper Western style buckle that he wore. Shayne was glad the suit was a bit tight. This would be no time to lose his pants. Fortunately they rode his big hip bones without slipping.

Nita took the big silver buckle to Jay. She didn't toss it to him or drop it in his lap. She held her own hand palm up under the Western buckle and offered it to him as if it were some rare and delicate object for his approval.

Jay took it up very carefully in two fingers.

It was obvious to Shayne that both of them knew exactly what they were about. His heart sank. There had been betrayal of his plan and Mr. Hargrove's. There wasn't the slightest doubt of that now.

"We all know Mr. Mike Shayne here," Jay said in his deadly silken tones. "We have a dossier on him as we do on all our enemies. He's a conservative dresser, normally, that is. I wonder what he's doing with anything as flashy as this crude artifact."

Under other circumstances Shayne might have been amused. As powerful as he was, this Jay liked to show off. He was expressing his intellectual contempt for the hoods who served him. It was vanity, and vanity is a weakness. Shayne filed

the fact in his memory bank. It was an unconscious process. He was waiting for what else Jay might say.

Jay turned the buckle over in his hand. He went on talking, his tone suggesting that he might be instructing a class of rather backward children.

"Notice this peculiar looking object soldered to the underside of the buckle. It's a bug. A very special sort of bug to be sure. It receives electrical impulses broadcast by another very special bug, and translates them into beeping sounds, or possibly buzzes and vibrations. Anyone—Mr. Shayne for instance—who is wearing this buckle will know instantly when he is close to the other bug that is doing the broadcasting. He can pick it up a long way off, several hundred yards anyway, and follow it. The beeps get louder as he gets closer. He could follow the other bug."

Jay paused and looked at them all.

"By this means he could follow, let us say, a regular United States mailbag that contained the proper broadcasting device. That's right, isn't it, Mr. Shayne?"

Mike Shayne said: "I don't know what you're talking about, Mr. Jay."

He knew though. He knew that his highly secret plan to keep track of the Esperance Diamond had somehow been made known to this man. With the aid of the sending and receiving bugs he had planned to follow the whole theft. The broad-

casting bug had been carefully built into the elaborate setting of which the diamond pendant was a part. Its broadcasting range was up to one-half mile, with the signal growing stronger as the two bugs became closer together.

Shayne intended to let the actual theft of the mail bag take place on schedule and then follow the signals wherever they led. He might even have to take a plane back to New York or to some other city, if the stolen jewel was being carried by courier. There was a packed bag in the trunk of his car parked outside this very building with money, clothing, even a passport in case the trail led outside the country.

Only when he was sure that the Esperance Diamond had reached its final destination would the big detective have tried to close in. All these thoughts went racing through his mind.

Mr. Jay looked at him and laughed a very unpleasant laugh.

"I can see that you know perfectly well what I'm talking about, Mr. Shayne," he said. "It was a clever plan. Against any other organization than ours it might have had a good chance of success."

He tossed the big silver buckle from hand to hand. Even in the dim light coming in from the electric fixture in the hallway, the silver managed to sparkle and shine.

"Tantalizing, isn't it?" Jay asked the big man. "Victory so near and



yet so far. Ah well, this world is full of might-have-beens."

Mike Shayne still said nothing. Jay wanted him to squirm, but Shayne wasn't about to do that.

Jay kept watching him with a malicious expression, but the big man kept his bruised face from showing any emotion whatsoever. For long moments their glances locked in a quiet struggle of will against will.

Jay was the first to give ground.

"You are a strong man, Mr. Shayne," he said then. "Strong and clever. The whole scheme was your own plan, I suppose?"

Shayne kept silence.

"A pity," Mr. Jay remarked. "A real pity to waste a man as strong as yourself. You're worth five of these men of mine. Such a pity."

He paused again. Shayne knew

exactly what the man meant. Now that he had been captured and the belt buckle taken from him, there was no reason for them to let him live any longer. He wouldn't give them the satisfaction of pleading for his life or showing any sign of fear.

Jay couldn't resist spelling it out to the end.

"It was easy to spot your Mr. Smith," he said. "We sent Charlie over to eliminate him from the picture before the mail comes in tonight. Fortunately I realized that Charlie wasn't too smart. I had Nita Nolan go along to keep an eye on him. Nita has brains and uses them.

"When Charlie didn't come out of the house, Nita looked through the windows. Then she arranged to capture you and bring you here to me. Nita knew who you were and what you were up to, of course."

He paused again. Then got to his point. "Will you join us now, Shayne? Switch sides. We'll pay you well, you know. This is the only time I'll ask."

Shayne looked at the little man and shook his head: "No."

"I'm sorry for that," Mr. Jay said. "I won't make the offer again. Take Mr. Shayne away and kill him, Rocky."

VI

THEY TOOK Mike Shayne out by the kitchen door and then turned right toward the Bay. With his arms and hands firmly bound behind him and

his feet hobbled by an eighteen-inch length of cord there wasn't much the big man could do to resist.

He went along with them. The men snickered at the short mincing steps he had to take to keep from falling flat on his face. Nita Nolan kept a hand on his left elbow, guiding him as he walked and once or twice giving him enough support to keep his balance in a tight spot.

She noticed the grateful look he gave her.

"I'm not writing you off yet, lover," she said so softly that the others couldn't hear. "Maybe you'll do the same for me some time."

In that context the remark was completely out of place. It set him to thinking, both then and later on. At the moment he only managed a grin and a wink in return.

There was a sea wall fronting the estate where it touched Biscayne Bay, and this was cut into by a docking slip which had a boathouse at the landward end.

They led Shayne into the boat-house and made him get into a sixteen foot lapstrake skiff tied up there. When he tried to balance so that he'd keep his feet one of the men hit him in the face. Shayne fell full length into the bottom of the skiff up toward the bow. The center seat had been taken out so he was lying in dirty seepage water along the keel.

He expected the men to shoot him or club him to death as he lay there.

Under the circumstances it would

have been a smart thing to do, but they didn't do it.

Rocky got into the stern of the skiff and hitched up a portable tank of gasoline to the outboard motor. He had trouble starting the motor, and the others laughed at him, but he finally got it going. He cast off the line and steered out of the boat slip into the open water.

"Put him down deep," one of them called out. "Let the crabs eat on him tonight."

Shayne didn't struggle. It was already dark on the water and no one from shore would see or care if they did. People were always acting crazy in boats.

Rocky steered straight out toward the channel where the Intracoastal Waterway buoys marked a deep cut in the Bay bottom.

When he was in the deep water Rocky cut the outboard's motor back to idling speed. He got a couple of heavy concrete blocks that he'd put in the boat at the dock and tied them together with a length of rope. Then he stood up and took a step forward toward where Shayne lay.

It was obvious he was going to tie the other end of the rope to the big man's feet to sink the body after it was put into the water. He'd probably shoot the detective first and then throw the body out of the skiff.

Mike Shayne wasn't the man to wait to be killed like a boar on hog-killing day.

As Rocky stood up to step for-

ward Shayne twisted suddenly over on his back. He bent his knees and then arched his whole body and launched a terrific kick with both feet as Rocky bent forward to reach for him.

If that kick had landed squarely it would have broken the hood's neck.

He saw it coming though, twisted his own body and tried to pull back. He wasn't quite fast enough.

Shayne's feet hit Rocky squarely on the upper chest with a heavy thud and lifted him backward and right over the gunwale of the skiff. He hit the water with a splash like a leaping tarpon going back into the water.

Shayne scrambled wildly in the bottom of the boat. In a moment he managed to get upright and hunched himself to the stern, where he could get his hands on the controls to the outboard motor.

He got the power control lever shoved over to full speed, and after that it was easy. Even with his hands tied behind his back it was simple to grasp and guide the tiller.

Shayne steered right across the bay for the lights on the Miami side. A long way behind him he thought he could hear Rocky floundering in the water, but he had no intention of going back to investigate.

It was fifteen minutes before Mike Shayne managed to guide the outboard skiff to the landing dock of a boat rental place on the Miami side of the Bay.

The night watchman in the boat slip had seen the big private detective's picture in the *Miami News* and luckily remembered that fact. He cut the big man loose and let him use the phone in the establishment's office.

The first call Shayne made was to the office of his long-time personal friend, Miami Chief of Police Will Gentry. The chief was in his private office smoking a long black cigar when the call came in.

"Thank God it's you, Mike," were his first words. "I was beginning to think you'd run into something you couldn't handle."

The Miami police were in on the case of the registered mail robberies, as were the authorities of a dozen other jurisdictions. On this occasion they'd agreed to keep hands off unless called in by the redhead himself.

Mr. Hargrove and the insurance syndicate he represented had political weight on a nationwide scale. They had convinced the police that the arrest of small time hoods would accomplish nothing compared to a chance to find and identify the kingpin of this deadly racket.

Chief Gentry accepted the reasoning. However, he and his men were standing by to assist in any way possible.

"I almost did," Shayne said. "They're on to this caper, Will. They got Smitty."

"That's rough," Gentry said. "Any idea who hit him?"

"You send a car to Smitty's place," Shayne said, "and you'll find the contract man right beside him on the living room floor. His name was Charlie, and he worked for a Mr. Jay on the Beach."

Shayne described Jay and gave the street number he'd seen on the iron gates of the old Beach estate.

"Jay's no local," Gentry said. "You'd know him or I would. You want me to tip Petey Painter to raid that house?"

"It would be a waste of time," Shayne said. "Jay doesn't live there. He and his boys borrowed it for a while. They were going to snatch me at the airport and take me over there. I saved them the trouble by turning up at Smitty's. By the time Petey's boys get there the joint will be empty."

"What do you want us to do? Put an army around that rock when the plane lands?"

"Not a bit of it. Leave me alone, like the original plan called for."

"I don't know if we can do that, Mike," Gentry said with a serious note in his gruff voice. "That was before we thought they knew you were in on this thing. If they know that, how much else do they know? We can't risk letting them get clean away with that big diamond. You know that."

"I don't know anything of the sort. Will, we've got to let them think they're one up on us and go ahead and make their play. Otherwise we keep the Esperance Dia-

mond. Sure, but Mr. Big is still as safe as ever. He goes right on raiding the mails just like before."

"Let Uncle Whiskers worry about that," Gentry said. "My neck will go under the chopper if that sparkler is lifted in my front yard. I have to have that stone tonight."

"Call Evan Hargrove in New York," Shayne said. "He'll tell you the same thing I do, and his people are big enough to make it stick. Nothing is going to do any good in this case except to come up with the name of the top man. If we don't manage that, then they just go right on operating like numbers or dope or prostitution. No matter how many small fry get picked up, they can always be replaced."

"You don't think this Mr. Jay is the top man?" Gentry asked.

"No," Shayne said, "I don't. That would be too easy. They wouldn't take me to him if he was really important. As a matter of fact, Will, they wouldn't let me get within a mile of him. No, this Jay character is a fall guy or a front man of some sort. Anyway, you call Hargrove in New York and get me a green light to go ahead with this in my own way."

"I won't have to call New York," Gentry said.

"Just what does that mean?"

"Your man Hargrove is in town. He's got a suite at the New Imperial so he can be right here for this operation. I can call him there in a

minute. Where can I ring you back when I hear what he has to say?"

"You can't," Shayne said with sudden decision. "I know what he's going to say. Just stay out of my way and let me do the job I was hired for."

"Now look, Mike. I don't know about this. I'm not sure you ought to be running loose the way you go wild on a case. There's two men dead already, and maybe another floating in the Bay."

"Hargrove said I had a license to kill," Shayne told his friend, "so don't worry about it. And don't try to contact me. I'll call you."

He hung up the phone.

The next call Mike Shayne made was to his confidential secretary, Lucy Hamilton.

"I'm okay," he told Lucy. "Had some trouble but perfectly okay now."

Shayne told Lucy to take an emergency bag containing money, a gun, some clean clothes which he kept at the office, and bring them to him at the boat rental place. From there she could drive him to a nearby car rental so that he could get transportation. His own car was still parked where he'd left it in the driveway of the big Miami Beach mansion. At least it was if Jay and his people hadn't decided to dispose of it.

In any case Shayne hadn't the least intention of going back to find out. Unless Rocky had managed to swim ashore and call the big house, Jay probably thought the detective

was dead and at the bottom of the Bay. That would have suited Mike Shayne perfectly. He didn't want to call attention to himself at the moment.

On the other hand he wasn't at all sure that Rocky was dead, or indeed that Rocky and the rest of them hadn't been doing some very elaborate play-acting there at the end.

If Mike Shayne had been in Mr. Jay's place, with a prisoner who was known to be very dangerous indeed to dispose of, he would have done it very differently. The logical thing would have been to kill Shayne right there in the mansion with a bullet, a knife or a club. Then, but only then, put the body in the skiff to be sunk in the Bay at leisure. They had him. He could have been killed. Nobody need worry about a corpse kicking Rocky overboard and escaping.

On the other hand, if they hadn't wanted Shayne dead they could have just left him tied up in the wine cellar—or for that matter driven him some place and turned him loose.

Why go through an elaborate charade in order to let him make his escape?

On the surface none of it really made sense.

Mike Shayne was smart enough, though, to know that a man like Mr. Jay was no fool, no matter what he might let himself appear to be. Whatever he had done was for a purpose.

Shayne had a strong idea his own life might depend upon his ability to figure out what that purpose was.

All these thoughts ran through Mike Shayne's head while he waited for Lucy Hamilton. It wasn't long that he had to wait. Lucy was an experienced and capable woman. When she was assisting her boss on a case, she didn't waste any time.

Shayne put on a clean shirt when she arrived, put money in his wallet—his own had vanished when Jay's hoods had frisked him—and put a gun back in his holster. He found a fresh belt and used it to replace the one from which the bugged buckle had been taken.

"I feel like a whole man now," he told Lucy Hamilton.

She laughed at him. "I never realized a belt made so much difference to a man."

He laughed too. "You know it was the gun I was talking about, Angel."

"Of course, Michael. I mean, if you say so, yes. What are you going to do now?"

"We're going to eat," Shayne said. "Drive me over to Gallagher's on the Boulevard and we'll each put away a big thick steak. After that take me to a car rental and I'll hire my own wheels."

"That sounds good," she said. "After that where do we go?"

"After that you go on home to your place and double lock the doors and get a good night's sleep."

"I want to help, Michael."

"The best way you can help right now is stay out of trouble so I don't have to worry about you. We are up against some real tough cookies on this one, Angel. Tough enough so I want you out of the line of fire."

She knew better than to argue with her boss about that. "Oh, Mr. Hargrove called you at the office about half an hour ago. He's on Miami Beach and wants you to call. He wants me to let him know if I hear from you. What should I do?"

"From now on for the rest of tonight you never heard of me," Mike Shayne told Lucy Hamilton. "Don't tell Will Gentry anything. I mean that. Not a thing. Above all, don't tell Hargrove you even heard from me. You don't know where I am."

VII

LUCY HAMILTON waited until she and Mike Shayne had been served huge blood-red steaks with all the trimmings at the famous Biscayne Boulevard restaurant before making any further comment. Then she took up right where the conversation had broken off before.

"Do you want to tell me the reason for so much secrecy, Michael?" she asked then. "I know you trust Will Gentry, and the police are on your side tonight. I thought you trusted Mr. Hargrove too."

"I do and I don't," Shayne said. "I thought only Hargrove and I knew about that trick belt buckle



and the bug in the setting of the diamond. Only I was wrong. This Mr. Jay character knew about it. He didn't just find it when I was searched, Angel. I'm positive he knew in advance what he was looking for."

"And you think Hargrove told him?"

"I don't know what I do think. Somebody told him, and who else knew about it? I didn't talk and you didn't."

"Somebody had to install the bug in the setting of that diamond," Lucy reminded him. "I don't suppose Hargrove could do that himself."

Shayne took a big bite of steak and followed it with a piece of garlic bread dipped in the steaming red juice on his plate.

"No, I don't suppose he's a jeweler, but I am sure he should have been plenty careful who did the job. The FBI must have people who

can do that sort of work. Anyway, I'm going to try and find out once and for all tonight."

"Do you really think they'll go ahead with the robbery after they know you escaped?"

"I don't know whether they know I escaped, Angel," he said. "Maybe Rocky did drown. Maybe they knew all along I was going to escape and planned it that way. So far all the way they've managed to stay one long step ahead of me."

"They might kill you next time."

"I might get struck by lightning," Shayne said. "At least I think from here on in I'm going out in front. I've got at least one trick up my sleeve I don't think they know about."

"What's that?"

"You know better than to ask. You go on home and get a good sleep."

"Fat chance of that."

"I said go on and get a good sleep. It's nine o'clock now. The plane with that stone on board isn't due to land until one-thirty in the morning. I'm positive they'll heist the registered mail bag exactly as they planned. I'm going to try and pick up the trail then, exactly as planned too. From there on I'll play the cards as they fall. If you don't hear from me by noon tomorrow, call Will and tell him to get everybody out looking for me. By then I'll know or they'll have me."

When Mike Shayne had picked up his rented car, Lucy Hamilton drove

on back to her own apartment.

The big detective drove out to the Miami International Airport. After showing credentials, he was ushered into the private office of the chief of airport security. Will Gentry was there, and Sheriff Burdick of Metropolitan Dade County and a couple of quiet, dark suited men introduced only as Mr. Smith and Mr. Jones.

Mike Shayne assumed that these two represented the federal government agencies involved.

"I take it that our original plan to follow the diamond is off now," the airport man said.

"Don't take it," Shayne said. "Just let it be. Follow the procedure we originally decided on. It's the only chance we have."

"You can't let them take the Esperance Diamond," one of the men said. "Not after what's already happened."

"That's exactly what I do mean," Shayne said. "Particularly after what happened. Let them take it. You know the procedure now. That sack will be passed to someone when the plane's cargo space is unloaded. Follow that someone until the stone leaves the airport. When it does call me. Give me a walkie-talkie set. I want to know which gate the stone is leaving by and in what sort of car or cover. You can tail it that far. You've done worse before. After it leaves the airport take your men off the tail. Let me have it."

"How can you follow the stone then?" Gentry asked.

Shayne knew that he was thinking of the lost directional indicator bug.

"I've got a sixth sense," Shayne said. "You know it's the only chance. They'll let your tail stay on to the gates. Beyond there, if their courier can't shake you, he'll let himself get caught. What good is that? You can jail small-fry again, but Mr. Big stays safe and hidden. You have to bet I can nail him."

"How good a bet is that, Mr. Shayne?" one of the government men asked quietly.

"I think I can do it," Mike Shayne said seriously. "You know I can't guarantee anything till all the chips are down, but I'm willing to try. I think I know a couple of things the rest of them don't know I know. I think I've got enough of an edge to pull it off."

"You had better be right," the same quiet man said.

"I'm betting my life that I am," Mike Shayne told them all. "I'm betting my own life, gentlemen."

VIII

MIKE SHAYNE sat in his rented car in the main parking lot of the Miami International Airport and listened to the walkie-talkie set on the seat beside him.

The sending unit of the set was in the office of the airport security director. Agents all over the field reported to that office by phone or by sending sets of their own and the meat of their reports was for

warded to Shayne where he sat and listened.

The plane from New York which carried the Esperance Diamond in its registered mail shipment was only about fifteen minutes late on the long landing strip.

"Plane taxis to stop on ramp near passenger ramp," the walkie-talkie said impersonally.

Then: "Passengers from New York debarking and walking to exit ramp."

Shayne knew that, as an added precaution and for this one arrival only, each passenger and the luggage he carried was being photographed at long range by special cameras equipped with telescopic lenses. Later on the photos would be checked for identification.

"Service truck approaching plane," the voice said in Shayne's ear.

There would be a truck from the catering firm which supplied food to the passengers to remove dishes and other things left over from the trip. Another would bring linens, pillows and the like and remove those used by the passengers.

Above all would be the trucks to take off baggage. Included in the baggage would be the mail sacks.

The actual theft of the registered mail sack wasn't made until the truck carrying it was in the maze of passageways under the main ticket levels of the airport building and on its way to the spot where a mail truck from the local post office would pick it up.

A caterer's truck collided with the baggage truck from the plane. Nobody was hurt, but suitcases and mail bags were strewn in the corridor. When the baggage truck was reloaded the registered mail sack had been switched with a dummy.

"The mail sack you want has been put in a large brown trunk and reloaded on the baggage truck," the walkie-talkie said.

Later: "The trunk you want has been claimed by a man who had the proper claim check but was not—repeat not—a passenger on the plane. He is carrying the small trunk out of the baggage room. Now he's hailing a cab. The driver helps him put the trunk in the cab. Now the man walks over to a vending machine and buys a pack of cigarettes.

"He's lighting a cigarette. Now he walks back and gets in the cab. No. Correction. No. He gets in the cab behind the one in which the trunk with the mail bag was loaded.

"Here are the license numbers of both cabs. The cabs are pulling out. They're headed for the main exit gate of the passenger car parking lot. Apparently headed for the LeJeune Road exit on the East-West Expressway to Miami Beach.

"We are cutting off surveillance at this point."

Shayne started the motor of his rented car and pulled quietly out of the parking space toward the exit gate.

For the past few minutes he'd known where the diamond was, or

approximately where it was, without needing the soft words over the walkie-talkie.

When Mike Shayne had said earlier that he had a trick up his sleeve he hadn't been kidding. It was inside the watch he wore strapped to his left wrist and it was a duplicate of the highly sophisticated "bug" that had been mounted inside his belt buckle.

Shayne was getting a steady "bzz-bzz bzz" vibration through the back of his watch against his wrist. As the two cabs drew closer the vibration got stronger. He pulled into the line of cars behind them heading for the exit gate. Once through the gate the two cabs did an "in and out and switch places" routine in the heavy traffic that was designed to confuse anyone trying to follow.

Shayne wasn't in any doubt. The walkie-talkie had given him the right license tag number and the wrist buzzer confirmed it as being accurate.

Once out at the LeJeune Road ramps of the expressway system the two cabs separated. The one with the passenger went north and got on the expressway of Highway I-95 that could take it either east to Miami Beach or north to Hollywood and Fort Lauderdale.

Mike Shayne let it go. The cab he was after went south on LeJeune Road and then east on North West Twentieth Street to North West Twenty-Seventh Avenue and then north again. After a few blocks it



pulled into a darkened garage back of a service station.

Shayne put his car in the parking lot of a bar and grille a few doors south of the garage. He turned off the lights and waited.

In about five minutes two identical appearing cabs pulled out of the garage and body shop. One turned north on Twenty-Seventh Avenue and the other south.

Mike Shayne paid no attention to either of the cabs. The buzzer strapped to his wrist was still sounding off loud and strong. That meant the jewel with its sending bug was still inside the darkened, now apparently abandoned garage. The service station out front was locked and closed for the night. Nobody showed.

No one went in or out of the ga

rage, but the buzzer continued to give out its strong and steady signal.

Shayne waited ten minutes, fifteen. Still nothing happened.

If he had wanted, he could have picked the lock to the garage door easily enough and then let his wrist buzzer locate the jewel for him even in the dark and cluttered space. He didn't. His job wasn't to recover the stone until it was in the hands of the Mr. Big of the whole robbery ring.

The wait stretched out to half an hour. A few people went in and out of the bar in front of which the detective was parked. Nobody went near the garage and service station.

Of course Shayne couldn't watch the whole place from his car. Someone could have sneaked in the back entrance where the detective couldn't see him. He couldn't have moved the bugged jewel, though, without its being known. As long as his buzzer was operating Shayne had only to wait where he was.

He didn't like it, though. The wait was stretching out beyond the length of time the big private detective thought was reasonable. He was worried back at deep conscious level where his instincts lived.

The Esperance Diamond was worth a million dollars in United States money. Nobody, but nobody, leaves a cool million lying around a crummy garage in the edge of a slum. It just doesn't check out with any sort of logic to do a thing like that.

No one with a million dollars.

Not unless somebody has a very special reason, that is.

Mike Shayne felt the small hairs stand up on the back of his neck just above the shirt collar. It was a feeling he got when he knew he was being watched or followed by a tail. Somebody had him under observation.

He sat there and wondered if a bullet would smash through the windshield in front of his face or come in the open window to where he sat in the car.

He was beginning to be very unhappy indeed.

A man and two women came out the door of the bar and started to walk toward the end of the line of parked cars. The man was staggering a bit. He had his arm around one of the women and she was giggling and whispering something into his ear.

The three of them went around behind Shayne's car. The man and woman went on down the line of cars.

The second woman didn't quite pass. She went to the rear of the car, then, swift as a ferret, doubled back to walk up to the driver's side and level a gun at Mike Shayne over the top of the door and through the open window.

Fast as she was she wasn't quite fast enough. Shayne had no intention at all of being caught napping for a second time that night.

The woman looked over the barrel of her own automatic into the

muzzle of the detective's big Colt's forty-five. At that range it was like looking into the mouth of a cannon.

"Hello, Nita," Mike Shayne said.

They looked at each other over their own guns. Both of them had good poker faces. Both were willing to shoot if they had to, and neither one underestimated the other.

"It's another stand-off," Nita Nolan said finally.

"So it is," Shayne said then. "That doesn't surprise a smart girl like you, does it?"

"No," she said, "I'll be damned if it does, at that."

They looked at each other for another long moment and then burst out laughing almost simultaneously. It was a laughter of genuine mirth, of two almost equally matched opponents who could agree on the humor of the situation.

"Let's us put these fool things away," Nita said finally. "Honestly, Mike, I'd rather switch than fight right now anyway. You know how it is with a woman, lover. If we don't have the drop on the man we won't play."

"Suits me," Mike Shayne said. "I don't think you came for anything but talk anyway. If you'd wanted to kill me, you'd have started shooting while you were still behind the car."

"Shoot you in the back? Of course I would have. I don't know why I pulled this fool gun anyhow. Simply an overgrown sense of the dramatic, I guess."

They looked each other over for

another moment and then both put their guns out of sight.

"How did you guess, lover? I thought it was such a good idea coming out with those two mooches as if I belonged with them."

"When I've once seen a beautiful woman," Shayne said, "I always recognize her the second time."

It was the only answer he'd give. It flattered her, as he knew it would.

"Come on. Get in the car," he said. "No sense standing there in the night air for the mosquitos to chew on." There weren't any mosquitos and they both knew it.

"Tell me what you wanted to talk about," the big man continued. "I think you want some sort of deal. Maybe we can trade."

"I hope we can," she said. "Really and truly I do, Mike Shayne. It'll be so much nicer and easier for everybody."

"Don't keep me in suspense," Shayne said. "How did you know I'd be here when you wanted me?"

"Rocky's a good swimmer," Nita said and watched the redhead out of the corner of her eyes.

Shayne gave her a wide-mouthed grin.

"I figured that," he said. "It didn't take more than a bitty sort of push to put him in the Bay. That's why he was the one sent out to put me on the bottom, isn't it?"

"You're as smart as we thought you were," she said. "What else do you know?"

Shayne took out a cigar and lit it.

"What else am I supposed to know? And why don't you start by telling me who's 'we'? I think I ought to know that before you and I get any further into this."

"I guess we owe you that much," she said and let herself slide closer to him on the seat of the car. "Mr. Jay and I and Rocky are working together. We're the ones who can make you a deal if you're willing to go along."

"I take it by that that Jay isn't the man I'm after? Because any deal I make includes getting that man and Jay doesn't look like the give up easy type."

"He isn't, lover. He isn't a quitter. If he was the man you wanted, my orders would have been to kill you. Rocky would have shot you in the boathouse and dumped dead meat in the Bay. You've got to have that figured out."

"I did," Shayne said. "I was sure of it after Rocky took his dive. On the other hand, you folks aren't just playing patty-cake either. The fact you showed up here means you know there's a million clams worth of flawless blue-white within a hundred yards of where we are right now."

"We know it," Nita nodded. "We figured you'd be smart enough to follow the stone this far. We know all about how it was tailed through the airport too. That's why the boys on that end were told to make it easy to watch. It didn't take any genius to spot the fuzz all over the

place. Besides we knew what they were there for right from the beginning, like we knew who you were and what you were carrying before I ever collected you at the house of that dumb schmoe who worked for you."

"He was no schmoe," Shayne said. "He was a friend of mine. Was Charlie on your team too?"

"Not exactly," she said. "I mean yes and no. Charlie was part of the varsity, you might say, but not Mr. Jay's team. Charlie took his orders from the man you really want. He would have pulled the trigger on you if you hadn't made out to lower the boom first. I mean, if it'd been Charlie in the skiff, things in the water would be eating your face right now. Are you starting to get the point, lover? I hope you are, I mean."

"I'm beginning to get it," Shayne told her. He felt her hand rubbing along his thigh. She was an attractive woman. "I begin to see. Your Mr. Jay wants me to find Mr. Big. He can't come right out and turn the boss in himself, but he wants me to do it for him. So he and you and Rocky keep me alive and let me get away from you on the beach. So what comes next? You sell me Mr. Big's name? Or maybe it's his name plus your help in getting back the big rock."

"Something like that, lover."

"All right. Why and for what price? Let's go over the why part first."

"Simple," she said. "Jay hates the bastard. He hates him enough to turn him in."

"I don't buy, beautiful. In your business everybody hates somebody. It's part of the job. Nobody turns a man in only for hate. There's no money in it."

She had her head on his shoulder by now. "That's right. It's not for hate. Jay's scared, I think. Even in his job he's got millions out of this caper. He knows it can't last forever. Now they got you — plus all those Uncle Whiskers' boys. Who next? Sooner or later somebody will get the right answer. Then what happens to people like Jay and me?"

"So what?" Shayne said. "It's an occupational risk."

"Up to a point, lover. Just up to a point. Jay's no fool. He'll give you the big man now, and cut out with what he has already. God knows it's enough for ten lifetimes. The game can't last much longer anyway. They kill you tonight if they can, okay, but who shows up tomorrow? We'll take you to Mr. Big. I think you can guess who he is."

"I can guess," Shayne said. "I can see the fingers point."

"We'll give you proof. Then you take him and leave us be."

"Big talk," Mike Shayne said. "When does the action start?"

"Right now," she said.

A car had just pulled into the closed and darkened gas station and garage up the block.

IX

MIKE SHAYNE and the woman, Nita Nolan, sat perfectly still in the front seat of the rented car.

A hundred yards down the block the other car parked and its lights blinked off. Mike Shayne could see that there were two men in the front seat.

After a moment one of them got out and walked over to the side door of the locked and darkened garage building. He must have had a key because he went right on in. He wasn't there more than a couple of minutes — and when he came out Shayne could tell by the way the buzzer in his watch acted up that the man was carrying the Esperance Diamond.

The second hand on the watch was a direction indicator. Instead of making regular sweeps it pointed to the location of the impulse that activated the buzzer.

Nita saw Shayne look at his watch.

"So that belt buckle wasn't the only bug," she said. "I figured you had to have another one, but I didn't think of the watch."

"Never underestimate an honest man," Shayne said.

The man carrying the diamond got back into the car and it started to pull out of the service station.

Mike Shayne started his own motor and prepared to follow. "Suppose they spot me tailing them?"

"They won't," Nita said. "Rocky is doing the driving. He has orders



to make sure he doesn't lose you if the traffic gets thick. He's going where you want to go, and Jay means for you to get there. So don't worry. Just tail him."

"Officer, follow that car," Shayne said and laughed.

The car ahead made directly for the nearest causeway to Miami Beach, and Mike Shayne had no trouble following. Even without his directional bug in the wrist watch it would have been easy enough. At this time of night there was still plenty of traffic on the main arterial streets and expressways, so he managed to keep at least a few cars between himself and his quarry.

It was all very well to know that Rocky expected to be followed, but presumably the other man in the car, the one actually carrying the million-dollar diamond, wouldn't be so complacent. If he became suspi-

cious of a tail, he could take sudden and drastic action to interfere.

Once on the Beach the lead car turned north and Mike Shayne followed until they got into the section of the newest, biggest, gaudiest and most expensive of all the hotels. On "Billion Dollar Row" he saw his quarry head into the parking lot of the tallest tower of them all.

Shayne pulled his own car into the drive of the hotel next to it and accepted a parking check from the attendant. He and Nita Nolan got out to walk back down Collins Avenue.

The buzzer on Shayne's wrist was still sending out its steady vibrations and the second hand of the watch swung and then held steady like a compass needle.

The hotel they were entering was the New Imperial.

"Surprised?" Nita asked.

She walked along beside Shayne matching him stride for stride but with an effortless grace the big man could never hope to equal. In the bright lights of the hotel lobby she was a beautiful woman and heads turned to watch them pass.

More than one northern millionaire envied Mike Shayne his companion that night.

He looked down at her and grinned.

"Surprised, lover?" she asked again.

"Of course not," Shayne said. "It's the penthouse suite, I guess."

"No," she said. "This is on the

fifteenth floor. You can guess the name."

"Of course I can guess the name, beautiful," Shayne said. "Every finger has been pointing right to that one name all night. The big question is, how do we get in? He has to be guarded."

"Sure he is," she nodded. "A couple of his boys are watching everybody that comes into the lobby. Only one thing, though. They know me. I'm your passport tonight. Where I go, you can go. Just don't make any moves until I tell you, though. We go up nice and easy and knock on the door like a couple of friends come up from the Surf Club for a cocktail."

"And when they let us in—"

"There'll be guns inside, lover, but don't forget Rocky will be there too. This time he'll be on our side. He'll be posted where he can cover the rest of them from behind. You and I both have guns too and can take care of ourselves. Check?"

Shayne said, "Check, beautiful."

He said that much out loud. In his mind he thought: "And maybe double check. Double cross and double check. How big a fool do you think I am, beautiful? Maybe a damn fool, but not a dead damn fool. Not tonight."

They crossed the huge lobby toward the bank of elevators and Shayne felt his feet sink into the soft, deep pile of the luxurious carpeting. Old men with diamond shirt studs and diamond rings on their

hands sat in the chairs and watched the lovely woman on his arm as buzzards might watch a lamb before they stooped and struck.

Mike Shayne knew who he was going to find in the apartment on the fifteenth floor of the New Imperial Hotel in Miami Beach. All day the fingers had pointed more and more convincingly in one direction—and it was the direction in which the big private detective least wanted to go.

According to all the evidence he was going to have to turn in the one man against whom it would be impossible to make a case stick, not because of lack of evidence but because all of that evidence would be circumstantial in nature and because too many people in high places would want to see Mr. Big go free again.

Of course, once Mr. Big got himself cleared of this charge he could continue to operate as usual. He might even have set up this confrontation deliberately in order to clear himself because he had begun to feel the net of the law closing in.

There was nothing Mike Shayne could do, though, but get into the elevator and ride to the fifteenth floor.

X

NITA NOLAN TOUCHED the bell of the apartment on the fifteenth floor. Her finger bounced in and out as she rang what had to be a code A

moment later the door swung open.

This was an elaborate and expensive apartment. There was even a small vestibule with a table topped by a Ming Dynasty jade statuette. Beyond the vestibule was a living room as big as the floor area of the average Miami home. Big picture windows looked out over the Atlantic Ocean at the far side of the room.

The man who had opened the door was big and broad-shouldered with the large, brutal face of a professional hood. He wore a three-hundred dollar suit with a bulge under the left shoulder where he packed a gun. His shirt had cost forty-five dollars and was dirty and soiled by sweat around the collar. He was balding and one ear had been almost torn loose in a fight. It had healed into a knot of scar tissue.

He gave them what he probably thought was a smile and stood aside to let them come in.

The second man inside the doorway to the big room could have been a carbon copy of the first except that both his ears were normal.

The man Rocky whom Shayne had last seen flipping over backward into Biscayne Bay was at the far end of the room, leaning one elbow on a white and gold grand piano. He gave the big man a wolfish grin. Shayne didn't like that grin.

There were two other men in the room.

One was a little fellow with a nose that kept twitching like a wea-

sel on the hunt and two black obsidian marbles for eyes. Shayne recognized him as a well known "contract man" — killer for hire — from the Detroit area.

The other man was Evan Hargrove, the insurance executive. He was the first to speak.

"My God, Shayne," he said, "what in the name of all that's holy are you doing here?"

"Why I thought you knew, Mr. Hargrove," Mike Shayne said. "They brought me up here to arrest you."

"Arrest me?"

"What in hell is going on here?" said weasel-nose.

"Everybody freeze!" That was a shout from Rocky at the far end of the big room.

Rocky had his gun out. It was a .357 magnum revolver with enough power to smash a man's head to a pulp or break him in half with a belly shot.

Nita had pulled a gun out of her shoulder bag. It was only a thirty-eight police positive that looked like a toy beside Rocky's cannon, but she used it to herd the thug in the vestibule into the big room.

"The jig's up, boss," she said to Hargrove. "You'd better turn the diamond over to Shayne."

"You don't believe this damned nonsense, do you, Shayne?" Hargrove asked. He looked white-faced and strained.

"What should I believe?" Shayne said. "What should I believe, Mr. Hargrove?" He took a few steps

over toward the insurance president, acutely conscious of the two guns at his back. "You do have the diamond, don't you, Mr. Hargrove?"

"Yes, I've got it," Hargrove said. "I can explain."

"He has it," Nita said. "You know he has it, Shayne. You tailed it here from the airport yourself. That's fact. Anything he says is just words."

"I know," Mike Shayne said. "Words."

"I've got a right to explain," Hargrove said. "Half an hour ago this man"—he jerked a thumb at weasel-nose—"came up here. He said the diamond had been stolen, but he could make a deal to sell it back to my insurance syndicate. He said you couldn't tail the stone and he showed me your belt buckle with the bug in it to prove you couldn't.

"I didn't know what to think, so I stalled. I said if he could really produce the Esperance stone I had to see it first before I could talk any sort of deal. He made a phone call and said that the diamond was on its way here.

"A few minutes ago these other three men showed up. They had the Esperance Diamond with them and they showed it to me. It's in my pocket now, and I'm convinced it's the real stone."

The bug on Mike's wrist confirmed that fact, but he didn't say so.

"Then this woman brings you in," Hargrove said. "I don't know what this is all about. Unless you're part

of this mob, Shayne. Have you sold me out?"

"Shayne hasn't sold anybody out," Nita said. "He did what he was hired to do. You thought he couldn't when you tipped us about the bug in his belt buckle and how to find it. You underrated him, boss. He's an honest man."

"She's crazy," Hargrove said. "You know who I am, Shayne. You know that no court in the country will convict me on a damned frame-up like this."

"Sure I know it," Shayne thought. "So does Nita-baby here, and Rocky and Mr. Jay and the Seventh Regiment of the cavalry. They all know. So you and I aren't going out of this room alive, Hargrove. We're going to stay here with the diamond and your corpse or mine will be labeled Mr. Big."

He didn't say that aloud. All he said was: "Show me the diamond, Mr. Hargrove. Put it on the coffee table there. Hurry up."

Hargrove looked desperate, but he wasn't a fighting man and the rest of them were. He took a soft chammois pouch out of his pocket and walked to the coffee table. He pulled the drawstring of the pouch.

Mike Shayne walked over and stood beside Hargrove at the coffee table. That put him between weasel-nose and the insurance man. Rocky and Nita Nolan and the two hoods were at least fifteen to twenty feet away and at his back.

Hargrove tipped the soft leather

pouch and tipped out the gold and jeweled pendant onto the dark wood top of the coffee table.

The million-dollar diamond blazed like a miniature sun under the lights.

Mike Shayne swung a hard right hand punch from his side. The blow took Hargrove on the side of the jaw and knocked him out like a light. His limp body hit the floor between the coffee table and the couch.

Shayne swung all the way around on the balls of his feet like a pivot. As he came, his right elbow took weasel-nose back of the ear. The killer lost interest in going for his gun. He went down on the floor next to Hargrove.

Shayne's right hand flipped down to the belt holster riding behind and above his right hip. As his hand closed on the butt of his own automatic the big man dropped on one knee. Rocky's first shot went over Shayne's head and smashed the big picture window.

Shayne brought his gun up with a fast, smooth sweep. His right knee was on the floor. He put his left elbow on the left knee—caught the right wrist in his left hand—braced the gun, and put a 300-grain soft lead slug into Rocky's heart.

He braced himself for the impact of Nita's thirty-eight but it missed his head by inches. Then the woman slid sideways along the wall and flipped the light switch. The room went partly dark. There was still

light coming in from the sky outside. It's never really dark in Miami Beach.

The gotch-eared thug was trying to get his gun out. Shayne fired at the blur of movement and heard his slug thud into flesh. The man screamed, tried to run, fell down and went on screaming and flopping like a broken-legged horse.

There was a moment of frozen inaction except for the wounded man on the floor.

The third hood called out then: "Don't shoot, Shayne. My hands are up."

Nita Nolan was only five feet from the man. When he called out, she twisted around and shot him through the head.

"I'm on your side, Mike," she called. "Here. I'll prove it." She threw her gun over onto the floor in front of Shayne.

The battle of the New Imperial Hotel was over.

"THEY MADE IT just too damned easy to believe," Mike Shayne told Evan Hargrove, Chief Gentry and the federal men an hour later. "Everything that happened pointed to a frame-up to convince us that Mr. Hargrove was the master mind. If I'd swallowed that story hook, line and sinker they'd have made an excuse to kill Hargrove 'trying to resist arrest' or something and let me sell it to you.

"At the end Nita realized I was too smart for that. We were both

going to be killed and left here with the diamond. The rap would have been pinned on one or both of us.

"I knew damn well it couldn't be Hargrove. If it had been he'd never have hired me. Above all he'd never have had the stone brought directly to him. Besides, I was sure he was an honest man."

"Why try to frame him at all, then?" Gentry asked.

"Because a thief always makes a wrong move when he's scared and this crowd felt the law breathing down their necks.

"Nita Nolan was Mr. Big, of course. Jay and the rest worked for her. She figured to trap the trappers, so to speak, use the diamond caper to throw the blame on somebody else and get herself in the clear by being on my side if anything went wrong. She almost made it too."

"What made you sure it was Nita?" Will Gentry asked.

"She didn't have to shoot that hood after he gave up," Shayne said. "There was only one reason to do that. To keep him from spilling that she was the boss. Rocky and gotch-ear were dead or dying already. Weasel-nose couldn't talk. She'd used him to kill before and could hang him if he did."

"That was the only reason?"

"No," Mike Shayne said. "I was pretty sure before that. It was only the clincher. She was the only one all day who showed enough brains to be boss of an outfit like that. It just had to be her."



THE LOOK OF GRATITUDE

What could it mean, that
message from the grave?
She'd never live to know.

by
EDWARD WELLEN

UNBLINKINGLY, Mrs. Blake concentrated on closing Jack Blake's lifeless fingers around the grip of the gun. They were warm, she noticed absently as she pressed them firmly to leave an unmistakable impression. Both flesh and metal were still warm.

Almost she could still see an unsuspecting Jack lined in the sights, his eyes beginning to lift from the book he was reading and register unbelief and then horror.

Almost she could still hear the echoing shot that ended his life at

twenty-one. Almost she could still feel the bruising kick of the gun.

She rose to her feet, sighing at the stiffness of her fifty-year-old framework. Her quick eyes took in the gun-cleaning equipment spread out on the table. She nodded her sleekly touched-up bloneness approvingly and her lovely violet eyes brightened.

Anyone could see at a glance it was a case of accidental death.

One last careful survey of the room, avoiding the accusing dead staring eyes of Jack, then she was

on the other side of the door of the den and mounting the stairs, returning to her sick-bed.

Twenty minutes later when he arrived, the doctor closed Jack's eyes gently, rose, and dusted his hands delicately. He looked inquiringly at Bill Winters. "You've called the police?" The doctor held his voice down, although he was sure it wouldn't carry through the door and up the stairs to Mrs. Blake.

"Yes, Dr. Reznic. Right after I phoned you." Bill Winters' eyes were anxious and his face was pale. His hand trembled lifting a cigarette to his lips for a brief puff. He corrected himself.

"No — not right after," he said. "First I ran up to Mother's room, to see if the noise of the shot had upset her. I was worried, coming home and finding Jack like that and then thinking of Mother being all alone in the house, none of the servants around today of all days. But I guess she'd already taken her sleeping pills and heard nothing. She was sound asleep as a baby."

Doctor Reznic pursed his lips and nodded. "That, at least, was fortunate." He gazed at Bill Winters gravely. "Your mother mustn't know of this. The shock might bring on a stroke. She's more seriously ill than she thinks."

"You're right, doctor, it would come as a terrible shock." Winters' earnest young face furrowed. "Mother would take Jack's death hard. She never thought of Jack as a step-

son, just as Dad Blake never looked on *me* as a stepson. We were one family. Jack's death, on top of Dad Blake's, might be too much for Mother to take."

"Then you'll keep it from her?"

"I'll do my best." Bill Winters squinted against the smoke. "But what if she asks for Jack, wonders why he's not around? How long can I put off the time when she sees through my lies? No telling what she'll be imagining." He took several quick puffs. Then his forehead smoothed and his eyes lighted up.

"I have an idea," he said, "how I can keep it from Mother."

In the distance a siren wailed nearer.

Days passed without Mrs. Blake hearing a word about the sad accident that had taken poor dear Jack. She thanked her stars she was not a fretful woman. If she were, she might well be beginning to wonder if something had gone wrong and be imagining frantically all kinds of disaster.

For it was strange that no one had broken the news to her. It was even stranger that the doctor had forbidden her to listen to the radio, turn on television and to read the newspapers. She wanted to hear of Jack's death. Once she heard of it she could forget he had ever lived. When would they get around to breaking it to her? As yet, he was merely "out of town."

Waiting could be maddening, yet Mrs. Blake lay in bed smiling peace-

fully and gazing unseeingly at the many-flowered iris pattern on the wall. Her son Bill would now come into all of Mr. Blake's fortune. She had seen to that. And no one, least of all Bill, would ever suspect Mrs. Blake of being a murderess.

Meanwhile, they all hesitated to bring hurt to the lovely violet eyes of Mrs. Blake. Kindly Mrs. Blake, Mrs. Blake of the weak heart. Ah, that was the reason they feared to tell her that poor dear Jack was dead. Her heart! How she had fooled that stupid doctor!

She checked a laugh that rose to her lips. Someone was coming up the stairs. Was it Bill?

She slipped her familiar look of patient suffering over her own coldly smiling face, closed her eyes, and waited.

It was Bill. She opened wide her lovely blue eyes and smiled bravely.

"Hello, dear," she sighed, and looked at her son with a wan smile.

Bill Winters bent his gaze on her. He forced gaiety into his voice, but there was an anxious look in his eyes. "Resting well, Mother? I hope I haven't wakened you? The

mail just came. I thought I'd bring yours right up."

"Sweet!" Mrs. Blake murmured.

"Here's a letter from Jack."

"A letter from—" Mrs. Blake strangled. The lovely violet eyes bulged horribly. She struggled to speak, found herself unable to utter a sound or even to move. Then the world blurred and blacked out.

Bill Winters' eyes were sick with self-reproach. They moved restlessly, as if they didn't know where to light, as if everything they touched reminded him painfully of the terrifying moment of his mother's attack.

"Don't blame yourself, Bill," Doctor Reznic said, looking at him kindly and at the same time piercingly, watching for symptoms of incipient breakdown. "Nothing you said brought on the stroke. Pull yourself together, man. Your mother needs you now more than ever. Keep on pretending that Jack is out of town. Keep on writing those letters he's supposed to be sending. Keep on reading them to your mother. I'm sure she'll be grateful, though she'll never be able to thank you — except with her eyes."

NEXT MONTH:

ASSIGNMENT—MURDER

A New Dramatic Short Espionage Novel

by F. W. NASH

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THE PRICE OF DEATH

*Death wore many faces in that dark,
bleak house. And for one last nightmare day a girl
knew who was the next to die — herself!*

by LEO P. KELLEY



CAROL MARSHALL searched through the stereo records scattered about the floor of her New York apartment and found the one she was looking for. She placed it on the turntable and a moment later Debussy added another pleasant dimension to the cozy living room and the quiet evening.

"My favorite," Carol murmured dreamily as she came over and sat down on the sofa beside Mike Prentiss.

"And you're mine," he said, deliberately misunderstanding her.

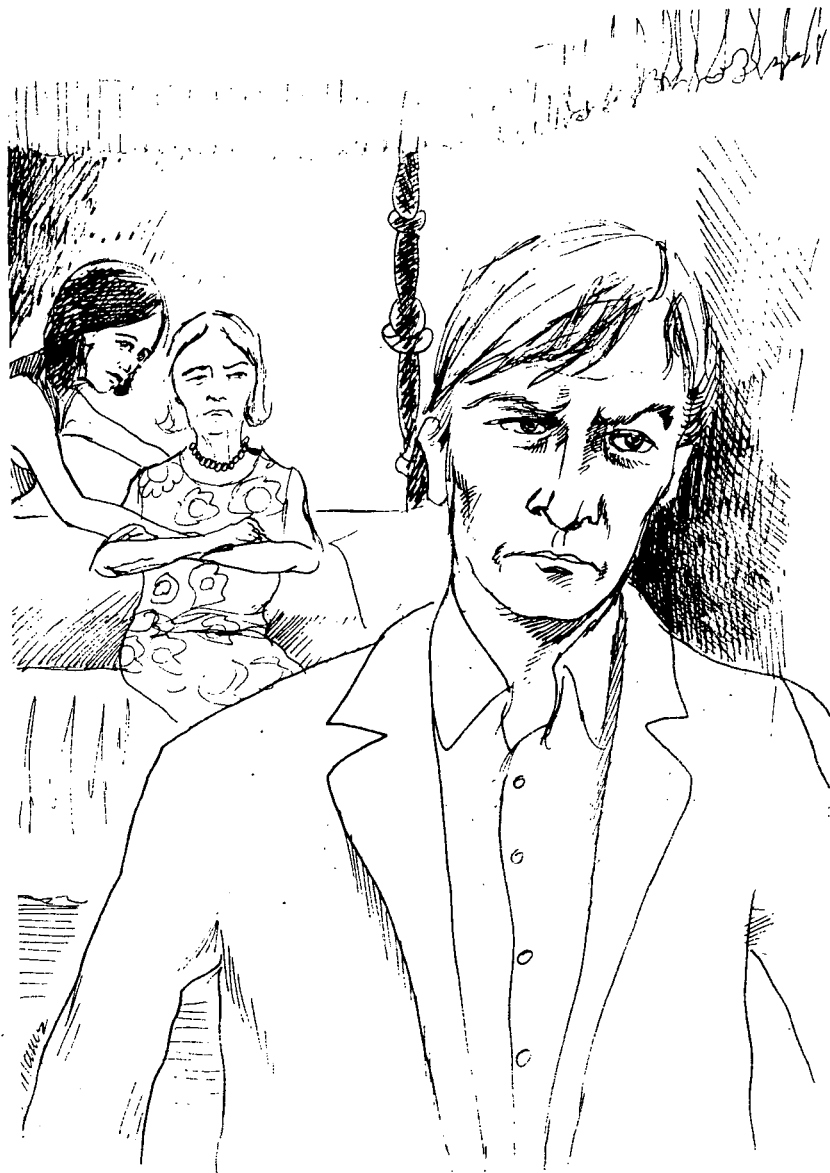
Her smile enriched the soft beauty of her face. Her short blue-black hair helmeted her head and framed

her face that bore, as Mike had once put it, "the features of a slightly underfed but still rosy Rubens' maiden."

Her eyes were sometimes blue, sometimes green, depending upon her mood and the changing light. Curled up as she was now beside Mike, she resembled nothing so much as a softly feline creature that might at any moment begin to purr its delight and contentment.

Mike put his arm around her as the music filled the room. All corduroy, suede and stark angles, Mike Prentiss was Carol's craggy haven. They nestled together, listening to the music, aware of each other and

A POWERFUL CRIME NOVELET



of a feeling of genuine joy that their togetherness always brought them.

At last Mike moved. "My arm's asleep."

"How very romantic."

He adjusted his position and then Carol's head returned to rest on his shoulder.

"So you quit your job at the hospital," he said.

"Not now, Mike." Carol hummed the theme of the symphony, her eyes closed.

"So what's wrong with nursing all of a sudden?"

She groaned in mild irritation and sat up. "Nothing. It's just the routine of the hospital that gets me. That and having to switch shifts all the time. Working one week days and the next week nights puts my biological clock out of order."

"Spoken like a true woman of science. So what are you going to do now?"

"Maybe I'll do nothing. Maybe I'll just be a flower child and live on air and sunshine."

"Steak and mashed potatoes would be better."

"Oh," she cried in mock chagrin, "you're always so practical. So dependable and down to earth."

"Which is why you love me."

"Which is partly why I love you. The other reasons, as your mighty ego undoubtedly knows, are far too numerous to enumerate."

"My uncrossed eyes. My status as a rising young corporation lawyer.

My majestic physique that makes women swoon and strong men weep in unabashed envy."

Carol gave a little laugh and got up as the music ended. She removed the record and began to search for another.

"No more, please," Mike protested. "You're music enough for me. Come back here."

She picked up the newspaper that was lying on the coffee table and brought it with her as she came over and sat down beside him again.

"See this?" She pointed to a classified advertisement which she had circled in red ink. "This is the answer to your question."

"What question?" Mike ran his fingers along the delicate curve of her jaw.

"You asked me what I was going to do now that I've quit the hospital, remember? Read this."

Mike pushed himself up from his slouch and read the advertisement aloud.

WANTED: Registered nurse to care for semi-invalid in her sixties. Applicant must be personable, thoughtful and efficient. For an interview phone Mr. Lowell Quentin at 718-9220.

"You're going to try to get this job?"

"I've already got it. I start tomorrow at eight o'clock in the morning. I've decided to try private case work for a while. It pays better than most hospitals and it gives me some control over my destiny."

"You sound very dramatic." He noticed her frown. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No. It's just that—well, I hope I'm doing the right thing. When Mr. Quentin interviewed me this morning, I had the creepiest feeling about him. He was very nice actually, but there's something rather strange about him."

"He's not your patient, is he?"

"No, it's his mother, Helena."

"Then you have nothing to worry about."

"I guess I don't." She paused, resting her chin in one hand. "Maybe it's their house that gives me such a freaky feeling. They live in an old brownstone up in the East Eighties with much fancy molding and chandeliers and I don't know how many gloomy rooms. Charles Addams would love that house."

"Forget it. Think about me instead." He held out his arms to her.

As she moved into them, she said, "I'm always thinking about you."

He rubbed his nose against hers and then kissed her hard.

A FEW MINUTES after twelve o'clock that night, Lowell Quentin sat in the black interior of the van as it moved through the darkness and cracked his knuckles nervously. His blond hair hung limp against his perspiring forehead and a muscle leaped in the tense flesh of his cheek.

He could not see his wrist watch in the darkness of the closed van,

but he estimated that at least two hours had passed since the driver of the van had met him in the Port Authority Bus Terminal at the pre-arranged time and then drove him away once again.

Suddenly the van swerved, stopped and then moved forward tentatively. Quentin heard the same grinding of machinery that he had heard the first time he had embarked on his deadly mission. The van was on an elevator, he guessed. As it rose, carrying him with it, he thought of heaven. And then he remembered hell as he thought of why he was here this second time.

The elevator stopped and silence came to sit with Quentin. After what seemed like an interminable time, the rear doors of the van swung open and a young man beckoned.

"Is everything—" Quentin began.

"It's the door at the end of the hall," the man said, his voice toneless. "The one on your left, same as last time. I'll take your suitcase."

Quentin handed over the suitcase which contained the change of clothes he had been told to bring. The man disappeared and Quentin, swallowing hard, got out of the van and headed for the door on the left.

Once through it and into the familiar bedroom, he almost relaxed. The huge bed dominated the room. Beside it on a nightstand was a lamp with a frilly pink shade. And in the center of the bed, propped up on fluffy pillows, her face resembling a wrinkled fig drowning

in too much whipped cream, Quentin recognized the woman who was watching him warily. Everything was perfect this time, he thought, just as it had been the last.

"It is," the woman announced, "long past time for my tea. You know, Lowell, I always take my tea early. Where is my tea, Lowell? Where?"

"Mother—"

"Was it girls, Lowell? Was that what kept you?"

He winced. Without answering, he picked up the teapot from the night stand and went into the adjoining bathroom and began to fill it with water. When he saw the long-bladed knife resting on the toilet tank, he shuddered. The first time there had been a tiny vial in the medicine cabinet. He had slipped the deadly contents of the vial into the tea. That had been so easy. But a knife! Could he—

"Lowell!" came the screech from the bedroom. "You're just like your father used to be before he abandoned us, a dawdler and a dreamer. Can't you hurry?"

"I'm hurrying, dear!" He felt the rage that was born of hatred for her tear through him but this time, instead of stifling it as he usually did, he let it boil within him and turn his blood to hot lava. He spun around, accidentally dropping the teapot as he did so.

"You bungler? What have you gone and done now, boy?"

Boy!

Quentin screamed for the first time in his life. "I am thirty-four years old and a man!"

"A man?" A shrill giggle and then a snide shriek of rasping amusement. "You, Lowell? You?"

He seized the knife, burst into the room and lunged. The knife flew up and then down and suddenly bright blood stained the sheets and the wall, all of it so much thicker than the tears puddling down his cheeks as he struck and struck until the slippery knife finally fell from his fingers.

He turned and ran for the door, weeping and wiping his wet hands on his good sharkskin suit. He tore open the door and fell into the arms of the man standing in the hall.

"Easy does it, sir," the man said soothingly. "Quite finished, are you?" He gave a curt nod and two other men who had been standing in the shadows stepped forward and relieved him of the burden of Quentin's quaking body.

The two men took Quentin to a shower room and later, when he was dressed in the clothes he had brought with him in his suitcase, they brought him a glass of sherry.

He sipped the wine, shuddered one final time, and then followed the men to his customary meeting with Mr. Yancey.

As he entered Mr. Yancey's office, he immediately handed over the roll of bills he had brought. Mr. Yancey accepted them and shoved them into a drawer of his desk.

"Was everything satisfactory, Mr. Quentin?"

Quentin nodded.

"Then you're still quite satisfied with our special service?"

"Yes."

"Good, good. Now do feel free to get in touch with us any time you feel the need. You have the number of our answering service. Just leave your name and we'll get in touch with you."

Mr. Yancey saw him to the door and then Quentin found himself being escorted by one of the faceless, nameless men to the van. As it dropped down on the invisible elevator, he found himself remembering how it had all begun.

He had been reading a magazine one day several months ago when the picture leaped out at him from the glossy printed page. It was a picture of a grinning man with circles imprinted on his face and a bull's eye located at the bridge of his nose. From the bull's eye protruded a dart. Quentin read the advertisement that offered dartboards for sale—dartboards with enlarged pictures of people pasted on them. The copy read in part:

"Just send us a clear snapshot of your worst friend or best enemy and we'll reproduce it on one of our delightful dartboards. Here's a truly fun way to work off your aggression . . ."

Almost without realizing what he was doing, he had taken the snap-



shot of his mother from his wallet and sent it together with his personal check to the post office box listed in the advertisement.

Two weeks later, Mr. Yancey appeared at the front door carrying an overstuffed attache case.

"Mr. Quentin?" he inquired as Quentin opened the door.

Later, in the living room, he showed Quentin his catalog of "novelties." One was a small doll (available in either gender) which, when placed under the miniature guillotine provided, spurted a red liquid which Mr. Yancey claimed was genuine ox blood.

Quentin insisted that he wasn't at all interested in Mr. Yancey's wares.

Undaunted, Mr. Yancey chattered on about supply and demand and his booming business. Quentin gradually realized that Mr. Yancey, as he talked, never actually mentioned the word murder. But somehow

Quentin began to understand that Mr. Yancey was offering him the chance to murder—safely and without the danger of detection. He could hardly believe what he was hearing. He was finally able to get Mr. Yancey out of the house.

After two days of serious thought, he sent a postcard to the box number requesting more information about the firm's "special service" that Mr. Yancey had so diplomatically and discreetly mentioned.

Mr. Yancey promptly returned and gave Quentin complete and detailed information about the "special service" his firm could provide. The next day, as he had been instructed to do, Quentin mailed additional photographs of Helena and her bedroom to the box number along with a tape recording of her voice which he had surreptitiously made. In less than a week a phone call came and he followed the instructions the male voice on the phone gave him.

He was driven to the unknown location where he confronted a perfect replica of Helena's room—and of Helena herself. That was the first time he had murdered whoever had been masquerading as his mother. Afterward, he had questioned Mr. Yancey about how the duplication had been accomplished.

"Hypnosis, sleep teaching, and professional makeup," Mr. Yancey replied. "Plus, of course, careful casting initially."

Quentin asked where the stand-ins came from

Mr. Yancey assured him merrily that New York was full of people without, as he put it, "connections." There was the Bowery and the Village. There were the thousands of unemployed actors and actresses willing to take any job who could be trained and then safely disposed of "afterward" with no one the wiser.

And tonight, Quentin thought, as he rode along in the dark van, I have murdered mother for the second time. The experience had been almost totally satisfying. But not wholly since Helena still lived. At least, he consoled himself, it had been safe and he did feel quite thoroughly relieved and unusually relaxed.

When the van let him out in the deserted canyons of Wall Street just before dawn, he wandered for uncounted hours before finding enough courage to return home—home where Helena would be waiting for him.

AS HE ENTERED the house, Quentin frowned at Carol, who had just come into the hall from the kitchen with a tray in her hands.

"Oh, good morning, Mr. Quentin," she greeted him cheerfully, pretending not to notice his drawn expression and red-rimmed eyes.

"Who—" he began as he stared at her white uniform and cap. And then, remembering suddenly, "Oh, it's you, Miss—uh, Miss—"

"Marshall" Carol supplied "I

was just taking this breakfast tray up to your mother. She's been asking for you. Perhaps you'd like to come up and—"

Quentin shook his head vigorously. "No. Not now. I couldn't—"

"Lowell!" Helena's voice bounced down the stairs like a thrown ball. "I know you're down there. Come up here this instant!"

Carol looked away from Quentin's agonized expression and proceeded up the stairs, aware that he was following her and aware too of his reluctance that was manifested in the slowness of his progress.

Helena snorted as Quentin appeared in the doorway of her bedroom behind Carol. She gestured brusquely and Carol placed the tray on the table beside the bed. "Well, Lowell?"

"Well, what?" He fidgeted, looked away and began to crack his knuckles.

"Where did you alleycat the night away this time? With one of your Eighth Avenue streetwalkers?"

"I was playing poker with friends," he lied.

"Playing poker with friends," she mimicked, causing Carol to flinch in embarrassment at her parody of Quentin's voice.

"And just where do you think you're going, Miss Marshall?"

"I forgot the magazine you asked for earlier."

Helena picked at her stiff gray hair and set her lips. To Quentin

tart. I can't understand why you chose her."

When Quentin didn't respond she turned to Carol. "Since my son has hired you, I suppose I shall have to put up with you. I hope you'll make yourself useful. Are you bright, Miss Marshall? Do you read? Do you like good music?"

"Yes, Mrs. Quentin. I read when I have the time and I do like music, classical music mostly."

"Have you read Baudelaire? Colette?" Helena slyly arched her eyebrows.

"Have you read Miller?" Carol shot back sharply. "I mean Henry, not Arthur."

Helena permitted herself a thin grin. "Good for you, girl! Fight fire with fire. Well done! Now then, a few ground rules. Don't come back here tomorrow in that uniform; you look positively starched out of your wits. Put on something pretty to cheer me up. Is that understood?"

"It is. But there is one thing, Mrs. Quentin. You spoke of ground rules, so I shall also. One of the things that I think is sadly missing from this world of ours is good old-fashioned common courtesy. Let's both of us try to practice it with one another in the days to come, shall we?"

Helena clapped her hands in delight. "Lowell, she's a dragon! I like her. I shall call you Carol and you may call me Helena."

"And you can call me Lowell,

Carol gave him a sympathetic smile and then left him alone with Helena.

In the days that followed, Carol found herself thinking of the baroque house in which she worked as a gigantic cage in which Quentin and Helena prowled about with the scent of blood in their nostrils.

Helena, she thought. Helena of the stinging tongue who was always flinging words to wound her son. And Quentin, suffering silently under the onslaughts. But Carol had noticed the fury that sometimes smoked in his eyes and caused the muscle in his cheek to twitch so disconcertingly. Mother and son, Carol mused, were like two dangerous beasts constantly but warily circling one another.

Carol was alone in her apartment that night preparing a salad when the doorbell rang.

"Hi, darling!" she cried happily as she opened the door to admit Mike Prentiss.

He placed his hands on her shoulders and inclined his head to place a kiss on her smooth forehead. "How's the new job?"

Carol led the way into the living room. "Oh, it's fine, I guess."

Mike flopped into a sling chair and leaned back to study her expression. "You guess?"

"It will work out all right. It just takes some getting used to, I suppose."

"My keen legal mind smells a

"Put your keen legal mind at ease and stop mixing metaphors. Minds don't smell anything. Only noses do." She went into the kitchen to finish making the salad.

Mike joined her. "What's wrong?"

Carol carefully arranged cubes of tomato on the plates with some crisp water cress. "Well, my patient is something of an unholy terror, I'm afraid. And she's not really sick. I checked with her doctor as a matter of routine and he told me she's as strong as an ox. Hypochondria was his rather blunt but confidential diagnosis. And then there's Quentin. It's hard to know just what to say about him. He's very polite and really rather gentle. Tense, though. Sometimes he makes me think of a bomb about to go off."

They had a drink while Carol's curry was cooking and later, at the table, Mike remarked, "You're a magnificent cook."

"It's no wonder you love me."

Throughout the meal, Mike remained unusually silent. Carol spoke of unimportant things while wondering what was on his mind. Finally she too fell silent and then began to remove the dishes. "I'll get the coffee."

"I've already got the ring," Mike said solemnly.

Carol sat down. "Mike." It was all she could manage as she stared at the gleaming diamond he was holding up to the light. It made her



that blazed in her suddenly wonderful universe.

"Give me your hand. I'll put it on."

Her eyes glowed as she held out her hand and he slipped the engagement ring on her finger.

"TODAY IS TUESDAY," Helena Quentin announced like a Roman emperor officially opening the Circus Maximus.

Carol, a bit surprised at the inanity of the remark, merely nodded.

"Tuesday is the day I always take clothes to the cleaner. I have my things all ready. Now we must get Quentin's. That boy would go about looking like a runover hippie if I let him. Come along."

Carol dutifully followed Helena up the stairs and was surprised to find that she did not bother to knock but simply flung open the door of Quentin's room and marched inside.

Carol had barely reached the doorway herself when Helena's cry startled her.

"Filthy! You filthy thing, you!" Helena's breathing was coming in shallow gasps as she tore the magazine from Quentin's hand and flung it over her shoulder.

Carol looked down as it fell at her feet. She felt herself blushing as the nude girl with the huge breasts leered at her from the colorful page. She looked up to find Quentin rigid with rage, confronting his mother.

"That was mine!" he snarled. "Why didn't you knock?"

Helena ignored him. "I don't ever want to see you—"

"You won't!" he shouted at her, his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides. "Because I'm leaving! I've had enough!" His voice broke. "I've had too much all these years!" he moaned.

Helena put out her hands and pushed him backward. "You're staying right here. Now sit down!"

Quentin opened his mouth but no words came. And then he ran past his mother and shoved Carol to one side as he fled from the room and down the long staircase.

Helena cried out, seized her chest and ran to the landing outside the room. She screamed and then collapsed.

Carol hurried over to her, knelt down and began to take her pulse.

From far below, Quentin's voice drifted up to her. "Is she dead?"

Carol shook her head. "She seems

to have fainted. Help me get her back to bed."

Soon after they had gotten Helena into bed she regained consciousness.

"Oh, Lowell," she cried, holding out a trembling hand to him. "How could you think of deserting me?"

Quentin dropped to his knees beside the bed and pressed her hand against his cheek as he mumbled soft words and tender endearments to her.

Carol left them alone.

That same afternoon, Helena came gliding down the stairs in a flowered smock and brilliant smile. She called out to Carol as she came into the kitchen and Carol returned her greeting, fastening a smile on her face.

"We are going gardening, my dear," Helena announced.

Carol, taken aback, said nothing.

Helena began rummaging in a closet in one corner of the vast kitchen, hauling out trowels and rakes and a dusty box full of even dustier packages of seeds,

"It's spring and I haven't planted a thing, Carol. Do you realize that? I must make the yard pretty for the summer. Lowell and I are both so fond of sitting together in the warm evenings with the smell of flowers all around us." She beckoned and Carol followed her out into the dismal yard behind the house.

Helena hesitated, surveying the area. "It really isn't much, is it? I

suppose it's been neglected much too long."

Carol shook her head in rueful agreement.

"Well, we'll just do what we can," Helena declared bravely and dropped to her knees on the flagstone walk and began to jab at the ground with the point of her trowel.

Almost an hour passed while she carefully placed her seeds in the ground and loudly lamented the weeds that were beginning to spring up everywhere to strangle the little grass that had begun to grow in the sunless yard.

Carol heard the shouting first. Helena, engrossed in her gardening, seemed unaware of it. A door slammed inside the house and then the doorbell began to shrill without stopping.

Helena looked up in annoyance. "Now what is that awful racket, do you suppose?" She got to her feet and marched resolutely into the house calling Quentin's name.

When Carol reached the living room, she found the front door open and Quentin standing forlornly beside a furious young blonde woman who was berating him in less than ladylike language.

"What do you want, young woman?" Helena demanded angrily.

"My money!" snapped the girl.

"Who is this—this person, Lowell?"

"This is Sharon — Miss Sharon Beaumont," Quentin replied uneasily. "Please" he whispered to the

girl, "I'll call you later at the hotel."

"Lowell, explain to me at once what this is all about!"

"Miss Beaumont; well, she—"

"I want my money!" the girl shouted. "He took all those pictures of me and he hasn't paid me a single cent. I want the money and the negatives. I've had second thoughts about those pictures he took. You know what happened to Marilyn Monroe because of that picture when she was just an unknown model like me."

"Get out of here," Helena ordered.

Miss Beaumont looked from Helena to Quentin and back again. "This here is your mother, huh, Quentin?" Without waiting for an answer, she opened her purse and took out a cellophane wrapped package and fung it at Helena. "That's the kind of pictures your son took of me!"

Helena looked at the back of the playing card visible through the clear wrapping. She threw the cards from her in disgust. "How much, Miss Beaumont?"

When the girl had finally gone with Helena's check securely tucked inside her purse, Helena turned to Quentin. "Before this began, I was out in the yard planting a garden. I had hoped to make such nice things grow. But I see now that I should turn my attention to less dangerous pursuits. Because I made you grow. Lowell, didn't I? And just look at

a policeman come knocking on my door and tell me how my son has taken to peeping in the neighbors' windows?"

Carol looked down at the floor as Quentin began to whimper like a whipped cur. She wished she could simply run from the room and be spared the sight and sound of his terrible humiliation.

"I am going to call a contractor," Helena announced in a voice that was slimy with scorn. "I will have him pave over the garden with cement so that not a single seed will ever sprout there again!"

LOWELL QUENTIN sat huddled in the van as it sped for hours through unknown territory to the place where he knew his fury would be released, after which peace, for a time, would return to him. When the van finally stopped, he got out, heard the man direct him to the door on the left as usual and he began to walk toward it.

"Here is the key, sir."

"What?"

The man handed him the key.

Quentin asked him why the door was locked. It had never been locked before. The man turned away without answering and disappeared around a bend in the corridor. Quentin went to the door, unlocked it and entered the room.

Helena.

Her voice struck him like a blow.

"Lowell, I want to know exactly

"Shut up!" he snarled at her. How marvelously she resembled his mother. How remarkable was the skill of Mr. Yancey and his staff!

"Lowell, I demand to know—"

"Shut up!" Quentin went to the bathroom and found the long silken cord coiled like a sleeping snake on the toilet tank. He picked it up and returned to the bedroom.

"Sit down!" he commanded.

"I certainly will not sit down. Not until you tell me just what is going on!"

He reached out and sent her careening onto the bed. In his hands, the deadly noose swooped up and around the thin column of her throat. She struggled but her eyes grew huge and then began to glaze. When she suddenly stopped struggling, he released his grip on the ends of the noose and left it wound loosely around her throat.

He found he could not stand the sight of her face which seemed to silently indict him for the crime he had just committed. Moaning softly, he removed a pillow case and placed it over her head in order to hide her face from his sight.

When he came out into the hall he found the man waiting for him as usual. They exchanged greetings and then the man entered the room and picked up the limp body that was lying on the bed.

"What do you do with them now?" Quentin asked with a mixture of curiosity and horror.

like to see?" He beckoned and a moment later emerged with Quentin in a room on a lower level of the building. He opened another door and led the way down a narrow hall to still another room which he displayed to a shocked Quentin.

"Why, this is a—" Quentin began, aghast.

"A most modern crematorium," the man interrupted. "Quite efficient. It leaves only a few cinders." He looked around the room with evident pride. "I sweep up afterward."

They returned to the room at the end of the hall and Quentin halted abruptly as the sound of someone knocking on the outer door startled him.

"It's all right," the man reassured him. "Wait right here." He quickly placed the body he was carrying inside a small room which looked to Quentin like an unused storage closet. And then he opened the door to admit a pale young girl who was wearing a dress that was obviously a size too small for her. "Yes, miss?"

"I'm supposed to see a Mr. Yancey about this ad he put in the paper." She held up a clipping. "It's about an acting job. Only I don't see why I had to meet that man who drove me here on the corner of 57th Street. What's all the secrecy about? Where are we? I know the ad said it was a closed casting call but still I—"

told her politely. "Mr. Yancey will interview you just as soon as he has finished with this gentleman."

Mr. Yancey, as Quentin entered his office a few minutes later, leaned back in his chair. "Well, now. Was everything quite satisfactory?"

"Yes."

"Very good."

Quentin gave him the money he had brought. "Some day—"

"Yes, Mr. Quentin?"

"Some day I won't need your service any more. Some day I will really kill her and then she will *really* be dead."

"You already have, Mr. Quentin, and she is."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Please listen to me carefully, Mr. Quentin. You might find what I am about to tell you somewhat shocking at first. The woman you just murdered *was* your mother!"

"No! I don't believe you!"

"Yes! You have just murdered Helena Quentin! We had her brought here for that specific purpose. One of my men picked her up at home long before you arrived here. He told her that you had been hurt in an automobile accident. I should mention that he was dressed as a policeman for the sake of authenticity."

"Then — then that was why the door was locked this time. So she couldn't escape!"

"Precisely."

"But why? *Why?*"

"Why, Mr. Quentin? Because you



wanted to kill her, that's why."

"I didn't! Not *really*!"

"Well, in any case, your training is now quite complete."

"My training?" Quentin managed to whisper in a strained voice.

"You see, Mr. Quentin, we have basically two kinds of customers. One is your type — the type who hates someone and wants to kill that person but can't quite bring himself to do so. But we also have another sort of customer, the person who sends us his or her own picture to be pasted on one of our little dartboards. The kind of person who hates himself enough to want to die."

"I don't understand," Quentin moaned.

Patiently, Mr. Yancey explained. "The second type is the person who wants to kill himself but who lacks the courage to do so. We offer such persons our service too. That is to say, we kill them. Mr. Quentin

Their fee, of course, is always payable in advance. We take clients like you and mold them into proficient murderers and then we employ them to render our service to the other sort of client I've just described."

Understanding swept over Quentin in an icy wave. He began to shake his head slowly from side to side. "No, please, I couldn't. I won't!"

"Wrong on both counts, Mr. Quentin. You can and you will. Otherwise, we will anonymously inform the police of your mother's death and then see to it that they find her body. You, of course, will be a prime suspect."

Mr. Yancey chuckled and placed his hands behind his head. "But I'm sure you will cooperate with us and I am also sure that given time you will come to rather enjoy your new occupation."

"But what will people say when they find out that my mother has disappeared?"

"No problem there. We have already trained a woman to take her place. The woman's name was formerly Grace Foulon. It is now Helena Quentin. Hypnosis and sleep teaching, plus the services of our cosmetic specialists, have turned her into— But you shall see for yourself." Mr. Yancey pressed a button on his desk and a few moments later a woman opened the door and stepped into the room.

"Lowell!" she cried. "Wherever

Quentin shrank from her. The inflection of her voice was perfect. So was her physical resemblance to Helena Quentin. The effect was ghostly. Despair welled up in him as he realized that his mother, for all intents and purposes, was indestructible. Like the legendary phoenix, she rose up again out of her own ashes.

"Lowell, it is time to be getting on. I want to go home."

Mr. Yancey said, "In just a moment, Mrs. Quentin. First I'd like to have a word with your son. In private, if you don't mind."

She huffed her way out of the room.

"Now then," Mr. Yancey declared, smiling at Quentin. He handed Quentin a slip of paper on which was written a man's name and address and a date in the middle of the next week. He turned and took a .38 caliber revolver from his desk drawer and gave it to Quentin.

"This is what you will use to dispatch our client whose name is listed on that piece of paper I just gave you. I must warn you that if you bungle the job, we will not be able to help you. You see, our organization is untraceable. The plodding police will not believe your fantastic story about us but they will arrest you for attempted murder. So succeed, Mr. Quentin, succeed.

"You may reach us through our answering service if you find it absolutely necessary to do so. And, of

from time to time when a new client is in need of the special service you can now provide."

CAROL MARSHALL found life in the Quentin household becoming a very definite strain. She wondered if she had made a wise decision in giving up her position at the hospital for private casework. But it was not private casework, she realized, that was her problem. It was the particular case — and patient — she had taken that was the problem. Helena Quentin was enough to cause anyone to feel a sense of strain. Quentin too, for that matter. His cringing and fawning sickened Carol. At times, she found herself comparing him with Mike and the comparison was in no way favorable to Quentin. But Mike, she reminded herself, did not have Helena for a mother.

"Lowell," Helena called down from her bedroom. "Carol! One of you bring me my tea at once. It's already past four!"

Carol was about to call up the stairs to tell her that her tea would be ready within minutes but Quentin's response to the summons stopped her.

"Shut up!"

Carol, shocked for reasons she didn't quite comprehend, finished preparing the tea and started up the stairs. She had never heard Quentin speak to his mother like that before. Shut up! Was the mouse becoming

explain to herself why this possibility frightened her. Perhaps it was because she sensed the swirling of an almost palpable mist of menace around the man the mouse was becoming.

After the tea had been served and consumed, Carol suggested a stroll outside.

"No, I think I need some freshening up. Get me my hand mirror. Then you can brush my hair."

Carol brought the mirror and picked up the hairbrush.

A faint wail and, "Oh, how I wish I were young again! I've grown so old!"

"You're strong and you have your health," Carol responded. "That's what's most important."

"Why, isn't that strange?"

"What is strange?"

"My moles. I always had two tiny moles right here just under my chin. And now I don't. They're gone!"

Something stirred within Carol. It was something unclear, something dark and shrouded with shadows. It had been there for days now, she realized. There was, she thought, something subtly different about Helena recently. Quentin was not the only one who had changed. She thought of the way Helena usually walked, like a woman bearing the weight of the world on her shoulders. She still walked that way, but now there were brief moments when she seemed to trip lightly for a step or two as if to some music only she

"I'd grown quite fond of those moles, believe it or not. I always thought of them as tiny beauty marks. I feel as if a part of me is gone." A slight pause and then, "Lowell, is that you creeping about out there?"

When he sidled reluctantly into the room, she told him, "My moles are gone. I've had them all my life and now they've vanished."

Carol noticed that Quentin stiffened at the announcement.

"Grace—" He pressed his lips together.

Carol glanced at him in surprise. "Lowell, did you say—"

"Leave me alone!" he shouted. "Both of you. Just leave me alone!"

He threw up his hands as the hand mirror flew at him. It struck the left side of his face and blood began to gully down his cheek. The color of the rest of his face almost matched the wound's redness as fury tore through him. He raised a fist and brought it crashing down against the skull of the woman glaring at him from the bed.

"Lowell!" Carol cried and sprang forward to try to restrain him.

But restraint was not necessary. Quentin ran past her and out of the room.

"I'm so sorry," Carol murmured. "But he was terribly upset." She forced herself to look at her patient and noticed at once that there was something different about her eyes.

"Who—who are you?"

doctor to come and have a look at you." Had the blow Quentin given her caused a concussion, she wondered.

"I don't know you. Do I know you?"

"Sshhh. Try to rest now while I call the doctor, Helena."

"Helena? My name isn't Helena. It's Grace, Grace Foulon. Where am I?"

Carol felt her stomach lurch. Quentin had called this woman Grace a moment ago and now she herself was laying claim to that name.

"Am I sick? Is this a hospital?"

"Lie still, please. I'll be back in a moment and I'll try to explain." Carol hurried from the room and picked up the telephone in the hall.

"Mike," she exclaimed with relief when he finally answered. "Get the police. Tell them Quentin has done something awful to Helena. The woman he's been pretending is his mother isn't at all."

"Hey, hold on a minute! Now what—"

"Please, Mike. I can't explain now because I haven't time and I don't know exactly what has happened. But I'm convinced that the woman I've been taking care of for the last few days is not Helena Quentin. Now call the police while I try to find out what I can."

"Who were you calling, Carol?" Quentin asked as she put down the phone. He was holding a wet cloth

top of the stairs. "Who is Mike?"

Carol tried to smile. "He's my fiancée. Now if you'll excuse me, I'll get back to your mother."

"My mother," Quentin repeated, his eyes narrowing and the muscle leaping to uneasy life in his cheek. "You know very well she isn't my mother. I heard what you just told your fiancée." He withdrew the revolver Mr. Yancey had given him from the inside pocket of his coat. "You shouldn't have told him to call the police. That was a very silly thing to do."

As he advanced on her, Carol backed away until she found herself inside the bedroom again with Grace Foulon.

"Hey, I'm getting out of here!" Grace yelled when she saw the gun in Quentin's hand. She made a dash for the door but Quentin spun around, fired, and then stepped back as she fell to the floor.

He shuddered convulsively and then looked at Carol.

"I have friends," he told her, in a strained voice, almost as if he were trying to reassure himself. "They'll know what to do with her." He pointed to the body at his feet. "And with you."

He locked Carol in the bedroom and returned a few minutes later with clothesline which he used to bind her hands and ankles. He took a silk scarf from a dresser drawer and stuffed it into her mouth. Then he dragged her into the room's deep

hooks protruding from the rear wall. She recoiled in horror as he placed Grace Foulon's lifeless body on the floor at her feet.

Carol struggled soundlessly in the thick darkness as she listened to the sounds Quentin made as he walked down the hall, picked up the telephone and began to dial.

DETECTIVE Christopher Tadlock was a man who sometimes thought he had heard and seen everything during his forty-seven years but as he listened to what Mike Prentiss was telling him, he decided he had not heard everything after all.

"You don't believe me," Mike muttered when he had finished his story.

"You say your fiancée phoned you and said that someone was impersonating Mrs. Quentin. And you claim that when you called Miss Marshall back to question her further, Lowell Quentin answered and said she had just left the house."

"He said she had just quit without giving any notice. But Carol wouldn't do a thing like that. That's why I want you to investigate."

Tadlock stroked his chin and said, "Well, I could pay Quentin a call since you've reported your fiancée missing. I could ask him for any information he might be able to give me that would help us locate her?"

"Let's go, Tadlock," Mike Prentiss said, rising.

When they arrived at the house,

lock explained that he wanted to question him about Carol's behavior before her disappearance. Quentin's nervousness was apparent. He rubbed his hands up and down the sides of his trousers and sweat had begun to gleam on his forehead.

"May we come in, Mr. Quentin?" Tadlock asked politely.

Once seated in the living room, Quentin insisted he could tell Tadlock nothing. "Nothing, that is, except that Miss Marshall seemed obviously unbalanced. She left here, as I told Mr. Prentiss when he phoned a little while ago, without even giving any notice. I'm sorry but I can't help you."

"Lowell, come up here at once. I have something to say to you!"

Quentin leaped to his feet at the sound of Helena's voice, let out an anguished moan, and began to tremble uncontrollably.

"Your mother, Mr. Quentin?" Tadlock inquired.

"No!" Quentin practically shouted, shaking his head violently in disbelief. "I mean—"

"What's the matter, Mr. Quentin?" Mike Prentiss asked, noticing that the blood had drained from Quentin's face.

"My mother—I thought she was —" He swallowed the last ugly word he had been about to utter and sat down heavily.

Tadlock asked him more questions but got no satisfactory answers. Quentin was paving him al-

knew nothing about Carol's present whereabouts. No, she hadn't told him why she was leaving. Yes, he was convinced she was gone for good.

Tadlock stood up. "Okay, Mr. Quentin. Thanks for talking to me. I'll be in touch if I have any more questions. Come on, Prentiss."

Quentin ignored them and began to make his way up the stairs, slowly lifting one foot and then the other like a man moving underwater.

At the front door, Prentiss hesitated. "Tadlock, why didn't you—"

He looked back over his shoulder as he was about to close the door behind him and then seized Tadlock's arm.

"Let's take him!" Tadlock muttered as he saw Quentin standing in the open doorway of the bedroom with the revolver in his hand.

Mike Prentiss outdistanced Tadlock. He sprinted up the stairs, stumbled on the top step, sprawled face down on the landing, regained his feet and raced into the bedroom. He tackled Quentin, downing him. The gun flew from Quentin's hand and skittered across the floor.

"Good work, Prentiss!" Tadlock called out as he arrived in the room. "He was going to shoot her!"

Prentiss, on his hands and knees, released Quentin. He shook his head to clear it and swallowed twice, his eyes on the gun lying several feet away from him.

Suddenly a hand appeared with



and a shot tore through the room.

Quentin cried out in pain and rolled over on his side, seeking his assailant. He groaned as he stared up in disbelief at his mother, who was standing over him in sad triumph. He squeezed his eyes shut as the blood soaked silently through his thin shirt and his words wheezed from between his lips.

"I knew — knew I couldn't ever kill you." And then an expression that might have been relief flickered across his face. "I called for help. Yancey said — couldn't help. I'd botched it all." He grimaced, his face crumbling into wrinkled ruins as the pain seized him one final time.

"You're Mrs. Quentin?" Tadlock asked as he took the revolver from Helena's unresisting hand.

"Yes, I am Helena Quentin." She looked down at Quentin's motion-

lock could not interpret. "Is he dead?"

Tadlock bent over Quentin and a moment later said, "Yes, he is."

Helena slumped down into the rocker beside the bed and began to rock slowly back and forth.

"Lowell," she said, "tried to murder me."

"I'm Detective Tadlock, Mrs. Quentin. Please tell me what happened."

Helena sighed. "A policeman came to my house several days ago — at least I thought he was a policeman. He told me Quentin had been in an automobile accident and that he would take me to him. He chloroformed me in the car and when I awoke I was in a room exactly like my own. At first, I thought it actually was my own. But the door was locked. And then Quentin came in and he tried to strangle me."

She looked down again at the body at her feet. "But he bungled the job. The only harm he did was to cause me to faint and suffer a very sore throat afterward. When I regained consciousness I found he had placed a pillow case over my head. I removed it and let myself out of the closet I found myself in. I came upon a young girl in the outer room who told me she was an actress and she had come there about a job.

"I wanted revenge," Helena continued, as if talking to herself. "To

The idea came to me as soon as I saw the girl. I strangled her with the cord Lowell had left looped around my neck. Then I changed clothes with the dead girl and put the pillow case over her head so that whoever found her body would think she was me and wouldn't suspect that I had survived Lowell's clumsy attempt to murder me. Afterward, I managed to find my way out of the building without being seen."

"Do you know where this building is located, Mrs. Quentin?" Tadlock inquired.

Helena Quentin gave him an upstate New York address, which he promptly wrote down in a leather notebook.

"I spent a few days at a hotel here in the city making my plans," she continued. "And then I came home about an hour ago and let myself in the house. Quentin was in the basement doing something to the oil burner. I took a butcher knife from the kitchen and went upstairs to wait for him."

"Where is the knife, Mrs. Quentin?" Tadlock asked.

"Under my pillow over there."

Tadlock retrieved it.

Helena looked up at him. "I suppose I shall have to go along with you now, Detective Tadlock."

He nodded.

"I'll get my coat." She rose and opened the closet door. Her strangled cry blended with Mike's voice as he saw Carol and shouted her

name

Helena staggered backward and Tadlock helped her sit down in the rocker as Mike ran to Carol.

"Oh, Mike!" she cried as he gently removed the gag. "I heard a shot!"

"Are you all right?"

"Scared stiff but all right, I guess. Please—get me out of here."

Mike Prentiss helped her from the closet after untying the lengths of clothesline that bound her wrists and ankles.

"Who is that, Miss Marshall?" Tadlock asked, pointing to the body slumped on the floor of the closet.

"I don't know," Carol answered. "Her name is Grace Foulon but I don't know who she is or where she came from. All I know is that she was impersonating Helena." Carol's voice drifted into stunned silence as she saw Quentin's body.

"His mother murdered him," Mike Prentiss said softly. "That was the shot you heard."

"You must try to understand, Carol," Helena said faintly. "Lowell tried to murder *me*."

Noticing the puzzled expression on Carol's face, Helena said, "Your young man will explain it all to you later." She glanced at Tadlock. "That dead woman, she must have come from that awful place where I was imprisoned, where Lowell tried to murder me. I've told you where it's located. I expect you'll investigate?"

"I'll investigate Mrs. Quentin."

Tadlock told her. "I think we'd better go now."

Helena got up and gingerly removed her coat from the closet, avoiding the sight of Grace Foulon's body. She crossed to where Carol Marshall was sitting on the edge of the bed.

She reached out and took Carol's hands in her own. "I'm so very sorry, my dear." She looked down into

Quentin's open but unseeing eyes. "About everything."

"So am I," Carol Marshall responded sincerely, feeling the sudden sting in her eyes as she looked up at the haunted face hovering above her.

"I'm ready now," Helena Quentin said, turning to the detective.

Christopher Tadlock took her coat and held it for her.



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THE DEAD BABY DOLL

She had the face of an angel, a body that would lead a saint astray. But she'd played with the wrong boys, and now she was messily dead. Could I find her killer?

by JIM DUKE



IT HAD TAKEN me three weeks and a long, hot trip into California's Imperial Valley before I finally nailed this bail jumper in Calexico, a small burg on the stateside of the Mexican border.

It meant a tidy and much appreciated little check for five thousand dollars from the bail bond company in Los Angeles. But before making that two-hundred-mile drive back I thought a night on the town would

do me, Jason Varney, some good, so I stopped at the Purple Tail and soon found myself sharing a table and drinks with a heavily made-up and vaguely attractive brunette who had been footloose in the cocktail lounge.

The Purple Tail was one of those garish, low-slung restaurant-bars with an expensive, artificially exotic look and a menu to match.

We were sitting at a snug table

overlooking the dance floor where a half-dozen couples shuffled around to the noisy, five-piece, all-brass band shaking the air conditioned air with Mexican music.

"This is romantic," I yelled at my companion, and Sandy smiled while her head was going to the beat.

I glanced with a little boredom around the room, which was basically illuminated by one of those big rotating balls of several hundred small, mirror panels hanging from the ceiling. The light from blue and yellow spotlights was reflected over the room, giving me the feeling we were basking at the bottom of an aquarium.

The place was full of people but I spotted this platinum blonde at a booth across the room. She was in a helluva argument with a heavy-set, well-dressed character smoking a cigar.

She was so mad her head was trembling—either that or she was strung out a mile. She had the kind of classic face they launch ships over, but her boy friend was no winner. He had that well-fed face with too much lip.

I nudged Sandy and directed a nod in the stormy couple's direction. After taking it in she leaned over, showing me a generous portion of her breasts.

"The owner of this place," she said.

"And the broad?"

Sandy's small, pink-lipped mouth

turned down a trace at the edges. "His wife."

Well, that cooled that idea. So I looked back at Sandy and tried to do a little imagining. But it wasn't long before I was taking in the platinum across the room again. Suddenly she was huffing away and tossed a martini glass against the table, sending a tide of the sweet stuff all over her hubby's threads.

She stood up shakily, profiling a hell of a nice figure and turned on an indecisive heel. Her hubby looked anxiously around, making an apologetic appeal to anybody interested. I felt instantly sorry for him.

Ten years ago my ex pulled a similar dramatic stunt that capped months of feuding. She wanted me to quit the Los Angeles Police Department, which I did, eventually. But only after the divorce was final. So it was kind of sad to watch a replay and I wondered how long before their marriage was headed for the courts.

The whole little scene stuck in my mind and in large part, I suppose, spoiled the rest of the evening with Sandy. I took her home to her apartment at the Cortez Hotel in Calexico, but I wasn't with it. When I left she was decidedly unhappy.

In the morning the old head was not too bad and I comforted myself with a couple of over-easy eggs, orange juice and toast in a little six-booth cafe on Imperial Avenue, a block down from the Borderside

Motel, where I had been staying. I flopped open the local daily and smack on the front page was the picture of the platinum doll and the headlines:

WOMAN STABBED TO DEATH;
HUSBAND HELD

The story said the victim was twenty-seven-year-old Karice Brock. She had been brutally stabbed and slashed in a room at a motel near Brawley, about thirty miles north of Calexico. A boy friend, Pete Sturgeon, a truck driver, was treated for a bump on the head.

Her husband, Frank Brock, the guy with all the lip and the apologetic look, had been arrested at the scene.

I munched on my toast, considering the whole picture. Now, I've been in police work and in various roles relative to it for sixteen years, and I believe I know people. One thing I was certain. If the slashing and stabbing was correct, I couldn't see Brock—the guy I saw in the restaurant—swinging a knife in that fashion.

I stopped at the sheriff's office in El Centro, the county seat, and a few minutes later I was sitting in Lieutenant Vic Santos' office. He was an old acquaintance from my L.A.P.D. days. Vic was a dark Mexican with an easy smile who knew both sides of the border like his back yard.

"The case doesn't smell right, Vic," I told him.

"You know these people?" he asked me.

"No, I just saw the broad and her husband at the Purple Tail last night," I said. "Saw them arguing and her stomping out after decking him with a sloppy martini."

"Yeah, that's the report we got."

"What I saw of Brock, he's not the stabbing, slashing type. I mean this guy might knock her a couple of times, but hell, if he's a butcher killer then I—"

"Brock was at the scene," Vic broke in, opening a folder and leafing through it. "We got a tip by phone, sent a couple of units code three out there and caught Brock getting into his 1970 red Datsun. A bloody knife wrapped in a grease rag was in the back seat."

"Real pat," I said.

"This guy Sturgeon, her boy friend, says he went outside to get a pack of cigarettes and somebody clobbered him from behind. He did not see the guy. The girl was in bed in a pink see-through negligee and never had a chance."

Vic showed me some eight by tens. I shuddered, remembering that pretty face and body and now looking at the unflattering pictures of a slaughtered animal. The right arm was nearly hacked off and her throat was ripped so wide you could stick a foot in the hole.

"Pretty," I said.

"Brock denies it, of course," Vic said flatly. "Says he got a phone call telling him where his wife was. Says

he got there and she was already dead in the blood bath."

I nodded, removed a toothpick from my shirt pocket and began to chew on it. I had cut out the smoking and given up lifesavers, so all it was now was toothpicks.

"You got a clear motive," I said. "You got the murder weapon and a suspect at the scene. Sounds tight enough."

"We think so," Vic smiled. "Fingerprints?"

He frowned. "Wiped clean."

"Odd," I said. "Guy does that sort of thing and stashes his knife in the car. Why'd he wipe the handle clean?"

The lieutenant shrugged expressively. "Who knows? He cracked."

I gazed out the window at the dull little desert city. It was going to get mighty hot today. I was thinking of Los Angeles and the beach. Then I saw that poor slob sitting at the table trying to apologize with a shrug.

"Look," I said suddenly, "let me talk to Brock for a few minutes."

Vic gazed at me with just the hint of suspicion. "What're you digging for, Jason? You're no cop any more."

"Hell, I'm just curious."

"He's been talking to a lawyer all morning. He's got the money and he can afford the best."

"Sure. He'll get off with second degree, but that still means time in Folsom or Big O," I said.

"I'll buzz down there and see if

he wants to talk to a private dick." In a few moments he nodded it was okay. As I started to leave, Vic added: "By the way, Jason, Karice Brock was mainlining."

"Heroin, huh?"

"Recent tracks on her arm, and a number of old ones. We found some yellow jackets in her purse."

I LEFT THE building, thinking my little broad was not so dreamy after all. Maybe that was what she and her old man were gumming angrily about. I don't know what was drawing me into this thing, but I thought I'd just talk to Brock and settle it in my own mind that he wasn't the type. Santos and his crew were good, but maybe it was the boredom of the last case and the old murder case aura pumping me up like a rookie.

Brock, disheveled from lack of sleep, came into the small visitor's room and sat down with me at the bare table.

"Where's your lawyer?" I asked him.

"He's gonna fight for bail."

"Lots of luck," I said, knowing there was no chance.

"Do I know you?" He looked at me with his big, milky blue eyes.

"No," I said. "Jason Varney. From L. A."

Brock nodded. "Used to live up there myself. What's your interest in me, Varney?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "Just playing a hunch maybe. For some



cockeyed reason I don't think you killed your wife."

"Tell it to them," he snapped.

"I did," I said. "They say they got you wrapped up neat as a baby on this."

"I didn't do it," he said, looking down at his pudgy hands. "I loved her. I could never do—do that sort of thing."

I was chewing on another toothpick. "I saw you and her at the Purple Tail last night. What was the fight over?"

Brock looked surprised; I meant him to.

"You saw us?"

"Yeah. I was relaxing."

membering the scene, and maybe remembering other scenes. "She told me she had it. Found this guy, she says—wouldn't tell me his name. She was leaving. I pled with her. It was no good."

"How long she been on heroin?" I asked.

Brock flinched. "You know that too?"

"Aw, come on," I said. "This stuff comes out pretty quick."

He sighed. "I don't know. Maybe three or four years."

"You're lying."

He was angry now. "She wouldn't tell me. I tried to find out."

"Okay. So you didn't know. You tried to stop her. She told you to take a jump. She finds a stud and decides to run off. Now you say you got a tipoff where they were—"

"Yeah, somebody — don't know who—told me they were at the motel in Brawley."

"So you go out there to try to plead with her."

"I couldn't believe she was going to take off with a stupid, lousy truck driver."

"If you're on the level, then your caller was likely the killer," I said, knowing I was stretching logic a bit. But right now I was getting nowhere. Brock wasn't looking too good. "Think about it," I pressed. "Somebody was out to nail you."

He was thinking hard, his hands working over each other on the table. "I guess a guy can make a lot

"Sure," I said. "Some worse than others."

After a moment he said: "Prescott. Lyle Prescott."

"Doesn't mean a thing to me."

"Prescott Tire and Tube Service. Fifth Street."

"Why him?"

He hesitated, a little odd quiver to his eyelid. "We—we've just been enemies."

"Why?"

He stared at me. I was getting weary of this. I got up and tossed my chewed toothpick into a corner. "Hell, Brock, I don't know why the hell I'm even here."

As I got to the door, his voice cracked open: "Varney!"

I stopped.

"Listen, Varney, I don't trust these lawyers. I might wind up in the box choking on cyanide."

"Don't sweat it," I said. "Good lawyers in these cases can get you at the worst ten or fifteen years."

That didn't help him. "Jesus, I can't pull that. That's a lifetime for me."

My hand was still on the door knob. "Why Prescott?" I repeated.

"He's a big pusher."

"That's a reason?"

Brock again was measuring the silence and I was turning the knob.

"I do a little too," he added finally.

I turned and glared at the slob, suddenly hating his guts. "And you strung your wife out?"

"Not by God, no!"

the table. "I swear I tried to make her quit—"

"Go to hell!" I said, slamming the door. I went out to get some fresh air, but it was too damn hot. Vic Santos was standing at the door.

"How'd it go?" he asked casually.

"Why didn't you tell me Brock was pushing?" I said angrily.

"Proof, my friend. Old-fashioned proof. We got our suspicions and we don't like his smell. But no proof."

"Yeah. And how about Lyle Prescott?"

"It's the same word. The courts frown on illegal search and seizure, Varney."

"Okay," I said. "It's your baby."

He smiled, his white teeth against that brown face.

"Thanks, old friend."

I was climbing into my car when one of the deputies gave me a yell across the lot. "You Varney?"

I nodded.

"Brock wants to see you again."

"Tell him—" I paused, wondering what he ought to be told.

"He says it could mean money to you," said the deputy, a look in his heavy-lidded eyes that said he knew at that moment he was in the wrong business.

Well, I had a nice bundle, but it never hurt to listen to money talk some more. I went back into the cool jail and Brock looked relieved when I opened the door to the little

room.

"I'll give you five dollars."

and five thousand if you can nail the guy who killed Karice," he said quickly.

"If you didn't do it, these guys will clear you," I said without conviction, but at least clearing my conscience.

"I don't wanna take any chances, Varney." He was a pusher and I wanted to see him rot, but for ten grand I develop a mighty strong sense of justice.

"See my lawyer for the cash," said Brock, and I knew he could see my mind changing.

In less than an hour, Brock's young, ivy-league type attorney with a mop of hair counted out five thousand on the shiny glass-top desk and yielded a cautious smile to go with it.

I left feeling mighty rich and also a little dumb. I only had one lead right now—old tire and tubes. Prescott's layout was on the industrial edge of El Centro, a couple of block buildings and a tin warehouse behind a high chain link fence with mean coiled barbed wire running along the top. Tires were piled in dozens of tilting rows and the place smelled of oil and burnt rubber.

Prescott himself looked like he crawled in it for fun. A skinny, flat-faced and middle-aged man, he didn't stand when I entered his office. A big naked broad looked down in a pink smile from a year-old calendar behind his balding head.

I told him I was a private investigator working for Brock and I

thought he was going to throw the big wooden desk at me.

"That son of a bitch!" he yelled. "Watch him get off—"

"If he didn't do it, he will," I said, enjoying the air conditioning unit in the window.

"He damn well did it," Prescott said with conviction.

"How do you add it?"

"Him being there, the knife in the car."

"That's what they say, isn't it? But I hear you tipped him off about his wife and the stud, Spurgeon."

He snorted. "Like hell!"

"You didn't?" I asked innocently. "No."

"Somebody did."

"Brock, you idiot. He's got the contacts. All over the valley. He could find out where she was with one phone call."

"Yeah, maybe. But he didn't have to make any calls. Somebody saved him all the trouble."

I looked out the window at his operation, the big trucks on racks, the tires rolling off, new ones going on. But the old ones didn't look too bad to me. But what did I know about tires? Matter of fact, I didn't know a hell of a lot about the case. I was bluffing, but it's the way I play the game a lot of times.

"Busy place," I said.

Prescott came over, watching me suspiciously. "I get by."

"Bet a few trucks come over from Mexico?" He didn't say anything. I waited a minute timing myself

and then added: "Brock tells me you and him are in the same business."

Prescott whitened beneath his dirty face. "Don't know what you're talking about, Varney."

"Sure," I said blandly. "I was just figuring. It would be a neat way to cool your chief competition. Clue the jealous man onto his runaway wife. Then you time it right, stick her good and tip the gendarmes. Bingo! You got competition one on a nifty murder rap."

"That's a stinking lie!" he said with appropriate outrage. "Let me tell you about your boss. That creep married a hophead and he knew it. He could keep her as long as he kept her on the juice. Word is later he wanted her to drop it. Maybe it was getting too expensive and her loose mouth might be dangerous for him."

There was a disturbing edge of logic to it, and it was a part I hadn't figured. So maybe Brock was a lower slob than I imagined. That five thousand in my pocket began to smell as bad as Prescott's breath.

"Let me tell you something else," he went on. "Brock and me—well, we were partners once. He got greedy and cut me out. Took all the sources with him. Left me without a dime. Now I'm strictly straight. I don't mess in that world."

I gazed at Prescott's flat face and slate, dead eyes and I wondered if I was being a sucker for Brock.

Well, all you can do is listen and wait and try adding up pieces.

I HIT THE heat again, climbing into my car and watching a big semi rumble in. I could see Prescott looking out from his cool office at the arrival. Maybe he was watching his merchandise rolling in, I thought.

Hell! I wasn't a cop any more!

An hour later I was sitting and looking across Santos' desk as he leaned back, puffing a black cigar.

"Why don't you quit that lousy habit?" I suggested, pulling out a toothpick.

"Helps me think," said the dark lieutenant.

"Smells like burnt rubber."

"I don't ask about your tooth-picks."

"Okay," I smiled. "Look, I want to poke around Brock's place. Maybe I can stumble onto something."

"You're working for him. It's your game out there," he said, a bit sarcastically, I thought.

"I don't want to move in on you guys. I'd like you along so I don't step on local toes."

He seemed pleased, and I thought it would pay off in the long run. I never liked making enemies with local cops. You found yourself getting a lot more help and a lot more information by working through them and generally they were on your side. As a rule, they wanted to get the real ones.

"All right," he said. "I've been out there once and looked around."

"Never hurts to look again."

Brock lived in a rambling ranch-style home halfway between El Centro and Calexico on fifty acres of grass and eucalyptus trees surrounded by a tall iron fence and barking dogs inside.

"Food business pays good here," I said as we pulled up front.

"For this spread a guy needs some other income," Santos replied with a wink.

Inside it was as cool as a tomb. There was a monstrous room you could hold dances in, with flagstone walls and dark wood panels, a couple of oak bars, some massive Mexican murals and Spanish chandeliers that could decapitate you if they fell. The furniture was heavy, dark wood, again probably from Spain, with designed gouges and big bolts stylishly showing on the arms and legs.

I nosed around in the big front room and found nothing interesting. Santos was in the kitchen and came out in a few minutes shaking his head.

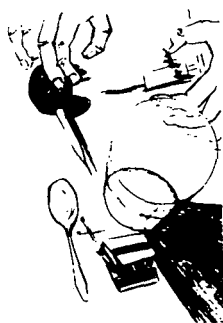
"Nothing here, either," I said. "Where's the lady's bedroom?"

"I think down the hall." I followed him down the long, plush carpeted hallway to the big wood door.

The lady's room was a mess. Santos whistled.

"Yeah," I said. "Hurricane weather."

"Wonder if they found what they



"Kept to this room. They must have."

We rummaged through the strewn clothing, very expensive stuff, and perfume bottles spilled on the floor, the bed mattress slashed apart and the contents of the huge closet emptied onto the floor.

At the lady's little pink desk where the drawers had been yanked out I began picking through the debris—the usual stuff desks accumulate. pencils, stationery, hair pins, spools of odd-colored thread, lots of make-up.

One item I pocketed, a small book of matches with "La Coral" on the cover and a Calexico address. I found Santos in the bathroom. His instinct had driven him a little further this time and he held up another discovery.

"That figures," I said.

"Cheap narcotic kit," he grumbled. "Spoon, rag, and hypo. Very cheap."

"From what I hear, she was tak-

ing it on the sly."

I pulled out the match book. "La Coral? A flea bag, a real joint."

"Well, they make their own matches."

"That's not the only thing they make," he said, jamming the narcotic kit into his coat pocket.

As we drove back I kept trying to get it clear, all the pieces. Here was this broad taking straight horse and cutting out on her big daddy, and he was a big supplier. But if Prescott was right, Brock was trying to finish it. She resisted. The addicts are something. Rob anyone for their habit, and they'll crawl in the gutter to anybody.

So the girl with the face and figure had crawled, at least once, to La Coral.

After I picked up my car at the sheriff's office I made it back to the motel for a shower and a little rest. The heat was getting to me. My mind got sluggish and sloppy when the temperature got above eighty.

There was a note at the motel desk to call Brock's attorney.

"I'm going to see Brock this evening," he said when I phoned. "Can I tell him anything new?"

"Yeah. Tell him his wife's bedroom entertained a stampede. And ask him if there was anything there somebody might want real bad."

"Looks like you're on to something," he said.

"Maybe. Maybe not. Could just be a routine housebreak. Bunch of kids read about the man behind

easy target." I knew that was baloney, but I didn't want to play out all my cards. It didn't hurt me to let Brock keep sweating.

During the summer it never stops getting hot in the Imperial Valley, even at night, so it didn't surprise me that evening when I left the restaurant after a light meal to hit the heat square on like a damn sledge.

Maybe it was the heat, but I was depressed, wondering if maybe I had over-extended myself a bit on this case. I was getting nowhere fast and I was beginning to worry I might not ever see Brock's other five grand. I suppose there was an element of pride. I didn't like that thought, however. It always seemed to me there were too many soft edges to it.

Right now my best lead seemed the flea bag, La Coral. I toyed with the idea of putting the screw on Prescott, but I figured he could dangle some more. He was still on my little list of could-be's.

AS VIC SANTOS advertised, La Coral was indeed a flea bag. It had a faded blue pasteboard front, facing a dingy side street a block from the border. A red, faded curtain, like a banner of futility, hung over the front doorway and the brassy Mexican music tumbled out onto the narrow sidewalk.

I paused outside, like a diver reluctant to hit the cold water, and then I dove in. It was a long, dim

against the bare wall on one side, and a bar with high, patched stools along the other wall. Bare wood tables were scattered without design in between. All this was on a scuffed and stained wood floor. These kind of places, I long ago thought, were the closest man would ever get to hell on this earth.

I hated to do it, but I wore a bright sports jacket to conceal my .38 Smith & Wesson holstered on my side. I knew I'd look damn silly with a jacket on in this heat, but I'd have looked like a fool with the cannon out for public inspection.

I slumped casually onto a stool and ordered a beer from a tubby Mexican with hair enough on his head for two. Looking around, I could see I was an odd ball. This was no gringo bar.

The tubby one drew me a beer.

"Hot night, amigo," I said for dumb conversation.

He grunted. At least he seemed to speak English.

"Don't get many gringos in here, do you, Sam?"

He slapped his towel with vengeance against the bar top and a pair of big flies flew for their lives successfully.

"Not many," he said through the swollen lips he was born with.

"How about women?"

He shook his head.

"Maybe a platinum, amigo?"

"Huh?"

"White," I said, pointing at my

"You a cop?"

I vigorously denied that one. He snorted and went away, obviously unconvinced. Getting nowhere with Sam, I turned on an elbow and gauged the rest. A fat Mexican gal, her hair hanging like a mop, and her equally portly boy friend were boozily engaged in some by-play at a table, oblivious to this world.

Three young Mexicans sat around a table in the far, dim corner, and one of them was giving me the narrow eye. Two other young ones were doing badly at the shuffleboard, and down the bar was an assortment of oldtimers nursing their beers.

I was getting restless. That's always a danger for me. I usually make a dumb mistake. But I had a .38 so I felt brave. The only thing is, a .38 is only good if you have something to shoot at. In this kind of place the targets dissolve mighty quick.

Grabbing another cold beer, I decided to play out the rest of my hand—what little I had of it. I sauntered over to the trio of boys at the table. The one who had been watching me stiffened as I approached.

"Hello, boys," I said cordially. "Mind if I join you?"

The thin one, with the makings of a fairly good Villa mustache, looked at me with a pair of dark, dull eyes.

"We don't know you," he said slowly and not at all cordially.

who were doing a poor job of suppressing smiles, raked out the fourth chair and plopped down.

"Nobody said you could sit," said my talkative friend.

"And nobody said I couldn't," I replied.

"You are in the wrong place, gringo."

I smiled. "Maybe. But I had a friend that made a connection here. I'm in the market."

"They sell beer and whisky here."

"Sure," I said, "but my friend is reliable."

"Your friend is no friend." His companions were giggling.

"I pay top dollar for good stuff."

"*No comprendo, senor,*" said my friend. He displayed for me all his fine white teeth.

I had a hunch our conversation was being monitored by every ear in the joint, and I was afraid I was in a little game of *machismo*, the Mexican's inflated word for masculinity. The bullfighter has it and so do the pill-popping street hoods.

"How about a gringo blonde—*blanca* hair, *comprende?*" I said, dredging from some musty high school Spanish.

Suddenly at the corner of my eye there was a quick movement and a skinny kid was going toward the curtained door. On a hunch I shoved away from the table and decided to collar the kid. I was tired of playing language games and really figured I had lost this hand, too, was

the old familiar hand grabbed my shoulder. It's an old move, and after you've had it a few times you react instinctively.

I kicked back hard and caught whoever it was in the soft place. I twisted fast in time to spot my young, thin *machismo* kissing the floor with a gasp of hot air coming from his contorted little mouth.

In four quick steps I broke through the curtain and spotted my target a half block away in a dead run. It was too damn warm to run, but I had no choice. I lost him in the blackest damn alley I ever ran into. Not a street lamp for a block. I quietly crouched down and pulled out my cannon. I suppose it was then that I began to feel like an idiot.

Now I had no target. I shut off my breathing to listen for sounds. I heard a screen door open and then creak shut somewhere in the distance. I was like that for a full minute, still anxious about moving. For all I knew the kid was hot-legging it five blocks away now, or he was getting his eyes adjusted to the dark a little sooner than I was and he was in throwing distance.

I heard it coming, and I hit the dirt ruts. It was a trash can. It banged against my back and clanged away. I rolled over and knew my kid was coming fast. Then he was there, a blur, and I could see the blade leading him. I did a quick twist and turn with my feet thrust out at him.

belly but that's the last thing I wanted now, so I caught him, kicking up, in his chest. He went back, staggering, and I was up. Maybe he saw the gun, because he took out at a dead run. It was dark down there, so I gave up. I was too winded for another dash. This kind of stuff I had left behind for the routine private investigation stuff.

I was aching in a dozen places when I got back to the lighted street. I went back to La Coral, but the place was locked tight as a safe. I stood there a minute, sweating like a pig and getting mad. Hell, this was Santos' case. He had the men for it. Here I was, getting on toward forty and twenty pounds overweight, acting like a rookie cop.

I crawled back into my car and slammed the door angrily. Well, I knew a few things more now. Karice made her contacts at that bar. I was certain. And I was pretty sure my kid with the frisky knife was up to his dark brown face in it. So I now had to start playing the full hand.

You spin your wheels in this kind of work, thinking you aren't going anywhere, but all of a sudden the roof starts coming down. Sometime, of course, you're dead wrong, but usually I'd been right. So I was going to start pushing some pillars.

It was after eleven and just beginning to cool a bit when I parked a block from Prescott's. I walked a block north, then west and approached the yard from the rear



The big shop was closed, but I could see a trace of light coming from beneath the big, corrugated steel doors to the warehouse.

It didn't take me long to find a bulge at the base of the fence, so I crawled under and moved from tire pile to pile until I was against the dark building, its steel side still warm from the day's heavy sun bath. I moved around two sides of the building before I spotted the cowboy leaning against the wall next to the door. From a distance it looked like a shotgun angling leisurely down from the crook of his arm. I stepped out of my shoes and moved in.

He got a flat, sharp blow from the side of my hand, groaned and crumpled to the ground. I grabbed the shotgun before it clattered, broke it open and tossed away the shells. Lying down, I peeked under the door. There were a lot of feet in the distance and I could hear a ripping sound and a lot of jumbled talk. I

must've heard Prescott's voice, otherwise I can't account for how it hit me.

There I was, on the ground, my mouth against the dirt, sweating and feeling vaguely nauseated and I remembered what Prescott had said about the knife in the car. There hadn't been any public reports of that; I had learned it myself from Santos.

I turned and got a good look at cowboy's kisser and then went back for my shoes. When I got back to the car I was dead tired and thankful that's all I was.

Later the hot shower did me good and I slept like a baby, saving all the thoughts for a clear, rested brain in the morning. It came quick, and after a hefty breakfast I knew I had two places to go, one on a hunch, the other by logic.

Santos greeted me with a sly grin.

"You must think you're twenty-five again," he said.

"I thought you'd hear about my fun and games at La Coral."

"I have ears, my friend."

"Do they tell you who the punk was I chased out?"

"My ears aren't that big. It could have been any number of junkies. Probably lined you up as a narc hot on his trail. They're kind of paranoid about that, you know."

"Okay, so that's no help. Anyway, I'm here on another hunch."

"Play it out," he said. "We're ar

"Good," I said. "Make him sweat it out."

He shook his head. "And to think the man is paying you. Such loyalty."

"My conscience is in here," I said, whacking my wallet, more for effect than anything else. Santos knew me better. "What I want," I went on, "is something on this character that Karice Brock was making off with. What's his name?"

"Pete Sturgeon."

"Yeah, Sturgeon."

"A trucker, hauler of sugar beets. Self-employed. Hundreds of them down here. Good money during the season."

"But it's not the season."

"Right."

"And he's got a record?"

"Disturbing the peace, battery, and one time for possession of dangerous restricted drugs — amphetamines. Very minor type. He's on probation for the drugs."

"Then you got a mug."

I followed the lieutenant down the hall to the I.D. room and he pulled out Sturgeon's little manila folder. I nodded, looking at the mug of the cowboy I leveled outside Prescott's warehouse last night.

"Know him?" Santos asked.

"Maybe," I replied. He was waiting for more, but I wasn't ready to play it that far, not just yet. My cards were being dealt a little better.

"Take it easy," Santos said, seriously now. "We don't like more than one murder every six months

down here. The D.A. is over-worked as it is."

When I got to Prescott's he was slouched behind his desk with a clean face on, not surprised to see me but obviously not delighted. I was sucking on a new mint-flavored toothpick.

"It's a dangerous world, Varney," he scowled.

"So I've heard," I said, seating myself leisurely in a chair against the wall with a good view of the naked broad on the opposite wall.

"What do you want?"

"Not much," I said. "Just a name. Maybe that'll do."

"Why should I give you a name?"

"To save number one, Prescott."

He tried a grin that failed. "Are you the s.o.b. that attacked my man last night?"

I smiled. "Sturgeon's got a weak neck."

His thin mouth began working. He leaned forward. "What do you want from me?"

"Like I said, a name."

"You want me to finger somebody," he said dully.

"You got it."

"I don't like you, Varney."

"That's the crack for the day," I grinned, loving this guy's hate. "Now quit snaking around. I'm tired. Who is the kid you play ball with at La Coral? The kid with the bright knife."

"I don't play no games there."

"So don't play with me then." I got up and went to the door.

"Wait a minute!" he protested.

I stood at the door, my hand on the knob, wondering curiously what his face was doing at that moment.

"Calderone," he said finally. "Angel Calderone."

"Address," I said to the door, liking that direction better.

"On Hidalgo, 204." He paused, and I could hear him sigh. "A shack at the rear."

"Thanks," I said, opening the door.

"Varney. I don't mess in the junk any more. Remember."

"I know, you're straight." I said, slamming the door to rattle the glass.

IN THIRTY MINUTES I was cruising down Hidalgo in the *barrio*, the Mexican neighborhood. It was already hot and not even ten o'clock. The sun was blazing on everything and the radio said cheerfully that it would only nudge above one hundred and ten today. Again I had my light jacket on with my .38 in tow. This time I didn't figure I'd be all that reluctant to use it. It was too hot to play games with knives and hot dashes.

I passed 204 once to size it up. It was a little white frame house with a low chainlink fence around it. The driveway beside it led to a shed in the rear, like Prescott said. I parked a block away and walked back. I decided not to take the driveway route to the shed.

I jumped the four-foot-high fence, I worked around the other

side, passed a big water cooler clanking away, fighting the heat, and water was dripping on the ground. I stopped at the corner of the house and looked over some laundry hanging limp from the clothes line in the white sunlight between me and the shed.

Using the clothes as a midway shield, I moved in and then dashed in the open the rest of the way. I waited a minute before looking in the dusty window. There was my kid, Calderone, lying on a cot, his arm dangling over the edge. For a moment I thought the idiot was dead, but the arm twitched and he rolled his head, his mop of black hair flopping over his face.

The kid was riding on somebody's trip. I eased up and went in the front door. The place was hot and smelled bad. Calderone looked up at me through invisible clouds. I popped him once across the mouth with my open hand and pulled him upright. He sagged like an empty sack. I could see his closed switchblade by his pillow, like a toy a kid sleeps with. I reached over and pocketed it.

"Why'd you do it?" I said slowly.

He looked at me with monumental disinterest, his mouth hitching up, not understanding. I crouched down to let him look at me without lifting his head. I was wondering if I didn't have an overdose on my hands.

"Listen, Calderone," I said, loud and slow, "you did the cutting

job on Karice Brock, didn't you?"

His mouth hung loose, little bubbles of saliva forming at the edges.

"Who paid you for it?" I tried shaking him a couple of times, but it was no good. I let him flop back and I started a little looking around. I didn't know what to find, but maybe it was what Karice had in her bedroom.

I pulled out drawers and opened cabinets and then began looking on the floor. The loose boards were in the bathroom under the basin. I pulled out a shoe box, which was tied with a pink ribbon. The toilet lid made as good a seat as any, so I sat down, tore off the ribbon and found a packet of letters inside with a little blue diary.

The diary was in very precise and small handwriting. I glanced over the routine passages and some pretty harsh indictments of Brock, skipped some pages and got to the past month.

On July 10 she wrote:

I'm trying to quit but I can't. I've pleaded with Frank but he won't give me anything. He says I must quit. Tonight I'm going to Prescott. He'll help me for sure.

The next day's entry read:

Thank God for Angel! Prescott told me I could find him at La Coral, a dreadful place, but Angel was there and he gave me enough heroin for a week. God! I'm alive again!

A little later she wrote

I don't understand Angel. He's reluctant to give me my supply. I'm so desperate. I want to get away. Frank knows I'm still on it. He threatened to turn me over to a hospital.

The entry a week ago read:

Pete will help me—he understands. I'll try one last time to ask Frank for a divorce. I love Pete very much.

I tore open the packet of letters. There were about a dozen of them, all dated during the past month. They were from Angel. The kid had it bad for her, the platinum angel. What she thought of him? She had not bothered to say in her diary.

That attitude killed her. The rest of the stuff Santos could read.

Calderone was still on his cot, half-dreamy. I went over and leaned down.

"I'll get some help for you, kid," I said, feeling a little sorry for the dope. He might even be on his last trip now. I was no expert on these matters.

As I reached down to get his pulse I heard the step outside the door. Again instinct dictated certain reactions so I dove like a fish toward the far wall. It wasn't a second too soon.

The shotgun blast shook the shed.

I had my .38 out and let three rapid ones go at the door. It was a kind of yelp. When I got to the door Sturgeon was sitting on the ground, the shotgun lying beside him and

blood squeezing out between his fingers as he held his side.

Well, one out of three shots wasn't bad.

He looked up at me with his big, open cowboy face, his mouth in a kind of stunned, partially open state.

"You bastard," he murmured.

I glanced back at the kid. The shotgun had finished his trip, and it did a damn good job on the cot. I could see people in the next yard scrambling around excitedly and some big-eyed kids running up the driveway and halting about twenty feet away when they saw my cannon. I quickly put it away.

"I'm bleeding to death," Sturgeon moaned, his slate eyes pleading. "Call a damn ambulance, man!"

"I can't hear you," I said, kneeling down.

"I'm dying."

"Maybe. Unless somebody puts a plug in that hole."

"Do something."

"Tell me."

"What, man? What?"

I could see his eye flitting around like a scared hare.

"Tell me the story before you pass out and I forget how to stop bleeding."

He gaped at me, perhaps amazed someone would treat him that way.

"Man, listen. The kid was crazy. Prescott knew it. He wanted Brock outta the way. So he got the kid to string Karice along as much as she wanted. But the kid got soft on her. So I started playing her out—Pres-

cott's orders. You see, he's my man."

"He's a swell guy."

"Man, do something about this, will you?"

I went into the shack and grabbed a dish towel. When I came out Sturgeon looked relieved. But not so good when I knelt down and didn't make a further move. "Keep talking, Sturgeon. You're bleeding it all out. It's a race, man."

"Prescott thought if I took her off on a runaway bit, Brock would flip and come gunning for her. I was going to play the hero. Gun him down defending Karice, but we did not figure on the kid. He must've been tailing Karice all this time."

"So he makes his play before Brock makes the scene," I said, helping along.

Sturgeon nodded desperately, eyeing the dish towel like a man wanting water in the desert. "The kid showed up while I'm grabbing a pack of cigarettes at the liquor store. I come back and—Jesus! He's hacked her to pieces. So I grab the kid and stash him in his car and tell him to beat it. When Brock drives up I toss the blade in his car and then run myself into one of those poles on the motel porch."

I stuffed the rag against Sturgeon's side and he groaned with the pain, but his eyes were grateful.

A couple of hours later, after I

signed the statement, Santos was leaning back and he grimaced. "I hate to let Brock go."

"Go through those letters and see about a search warrant. I think you will find enough junk in that little wine cellar under the Purple Tail to cool his backside for a very long time."

"That'll blow your five grand, Jason."

"You could do me a favor."

His eyes narrowed. "Like what?"

"Let him go for a few hours. Give me enough time to pick up my check from a very grateful man."

Santos thought about it for a second. "I guess we can manage that."

I popped a toothpick in my mouth. "I thought you could." At the door I turned: "By the way, you might take a look at that night time operation at Prescott's. Sounds like a lot of tire splitting there."

Santos was grinning from ear to ear. "Hey, *amigo*. How'd you like to pull a weekly check with us?"

"You kidding?" I said. "You guys aren't paid enough for this kind of work."

Brock was very grateful, five thousand worth, and I left him a happy man—for a while. I stopped by the Cortez later, but Sandy was out tooting with someone else. Well, I had owed her a fine night, but hell!

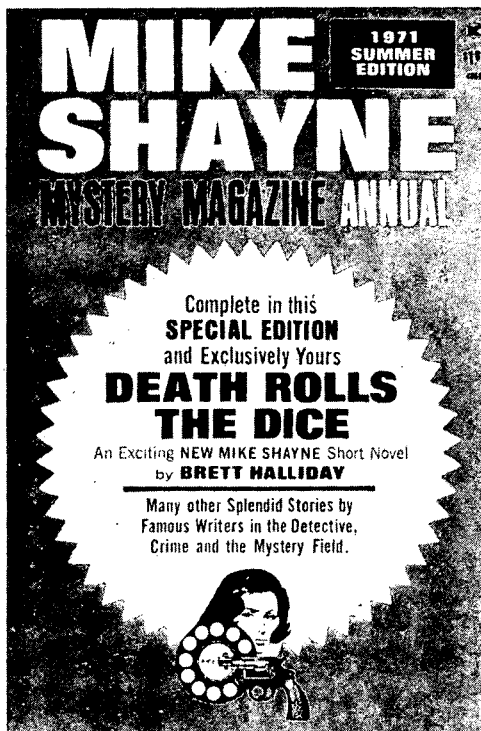
I was too tired to run her down.

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A BULLET FOR BIG NICK

by MICHAEL AVALLONE

A good cop was dead, and I was nearly so. One thing only kept me alive. The memory of my dead buddy — and my hate for the snarling hoodlum who had blasted him . . .



What makes a private detective? If you have ever wondered, here is the very first exploit of Ed Noon, fast talking, fast shooting private eye who has thrilled millions of readers the world over. Twenty-one Ed Noon books have been published since this, his first appearance. You will see here, without any doubt, the kind of fast, cracking action that has made Michael Avallone one of the very top crime writers today.

THE EDITOR'S



ED NOON'S FIRST CASE

A GOOD COP was dead. I had to do something about it. So I went down that night to see Big Nick Torrento at the Blue Grotto club. If a bigshot hood has no use for policemen, he has absolutely no time for private detectives.

Velvet, one of Nick's hand maidens, with blue chin and gun to match, made that pretty obvious at the door leading to Torrento's *sanc-tum sanctorum*. I didn't stop to talk. I hit him with all the hate I had in me. I wasn't thinking very straight. I had spent a terrible five minutes at the police morgue trying to recognize what was left of my friend, Mike Peters. I might never be able to eat hamburger again.

I was inside Big Nick's office, locking the door behind me fast, and digging out my .45. I wanted to be alone with the man I was sure had

ordered the murder of Mike Peters.

"Hey! Who let you in here without knocking?"

Big Nick Torrento was staring at me curiously from the depths of a large, square desk. The marble in-laid top gleamed. His black eyes popped, then narrowed shrewdly.

"What kinda amateur show is this, Eddie? I got enough entertainment for the club right now."

Torrento didn't scare easy. He was Big Nick, owner of his own night club and a mob ruler on the same plane with the Capones and the Anastasias of old. His small, black eyes glittered with contempt for me. The simple fact that he had not raised his fat, ring-studded fingers was just another display of that contempt.

I moved slowly from the doorway, poking the .45, trying to keep

a red haze out of my brain. "Evening, Nick. I came for a chat."

He grunted, rolling his cigar to the left side of his swab-lipped mouth. "How the hell did you get past Velvet? He never leaves my door. These monkeys of mine are getting careless."

"Velvet's all tied up right now," I said. "You've got a nice place here, Nick. Keeps your boys busy."

I could see he had reached the annoyance stage.

"You didn't come here to tell me what a nice dump I got. You better explain that hardware you're pushing in my face before I press a lot of buttons that'll get you a lot of bruises."

I didn't answer him directly. I jerked the slide of the .45, sending a shell into firing position. I had said plenty. Nick scowled, the angry furrows in his forehead deepening.

"C'mon, Ed. What's on your mind?"

I smiled. "Big Nick. That's you. Ed Noon. That's me. If Mike Peters was here, we could play a swell game of asking questions."

"What are you talking about, shamus?"

"I just came from the police morgue, Nick. You tell me. What's that poor kid now? Animal, vegetable, or mineral?"

"Oh, I get it now." Big Nick Torrento was smiling almost sympathetically at me. "Look, Ed. You can't pin that dead cop on this syn-

dicate. We're legal. All through with the rough stuff." His tone was righteous and I had an uncontrollable urge to punch his face.

"Now that's funny. Velvet gave me the same argument out in the hall. But when he tried to back it up with brass knuckles, I gave him the back of my hand."

Nick Torrento puffed on his cigar.

"Okay. You and Mike Peters were friends. He was a swell guy and the department'll give him a swell funeral. Maybe a medal. But why blame me? If you hadn't quit the force six months ago for this private eye stuff, you might have been with him on his last job and it might not have happened."

That had been bothering me too.

"I might have been. But I wasn't and it did happen. Which brings us right up to date, Nick. Me, with a gun on your belly in your own little rat hole."

The office was large, soundproofed and plush. Just the type the movies lead everyone to expect in the rear of fancy night clubs run by gangsters. Only you never got to see them unless you reneged on a bet or your check bounced.

Big Nick leaned back in his chair, little eyes squinting hard. "What have you got in mind, Ed? This can cost you your license when I get in touch with my mouthpiece. So you better make it good."

I showed him the nose of the .45. "You're on my mind, Nick. You

hold more appeal for me right now than Elizabeth Taylor."

"Yeah? What does that mean?"

"Just this." I leaned across the desk. "When I can pin this one on you, when I know for a fact that you killed that kid, there's one in here with your name on it." I tapped the barrel of the .45.

"You're crazy!" he roared.

"Am I? Mike Peters was working on your policy set-up. Don't bother to deny it. He told me about it three days before you stopped him."

Big Nick's beefy face paled, then reddened to nearly match the heavy carmine drapes behind his chair that blotted out the lights of the alley.

"Listen, punk." He bounced to his feet angrily. "Nobody tells Big Nick what they're going to do. He tells them! The next move is mine, dummy." His big paw shot swiftly out of sight behind the desk. The hidden buttons routine.

I was glad he tried it. I chopped the .45 down in a vicious arc. The .45's barrel made a crunching noise that rang like music in my ears. Torrento shrieked like a woman and fell back into his chair. I followed him, coming around the desk and ramming the muzzle of the .45 into the base of his heavy chin.

"Feel it, Nick. Feel it. Like Mike Peters did when your boys worked him over with their blackjacks. Couldn't you give him a bullet, Nick? One quick slug? No, you had to pretty him up so they'd have a



hard time identifying him. That was not nice, Nick, not nice at all."

Torrento strangled and swore. He tried to get out of the way but the gun pinned him to the chair. His black eyes were wide open now, in fear and bewilderment. His tongue lolled.

"Ed, whaddya—" he gagged. I reached down and dragged him to his feet. His bulk shivered. For one second, we stood eye to eye. Torrento, a fat, gasping hoodlum made rich by a world of suckers. Me, a poor man trying to tilt at a windmill. The only thing that separated our worlds and our intellects at this moment was the gun in my hand.

I hit him. His face dissolved in front of me in a blur of impact. The swivel chair squeaked noisily as his suddenly deposited bulk sat down again. His face twisted sightlessly toward the ceiling of his plush office.

I stared down at him. My forefinger tightened on the trigger of the .45. I had to shake my head to clear it of murder. Mike's bloody,

battered face kept looking at me from the slab down at headquarters.

I heard the phone ringing suddenly. A jangling, jarring tingle of sound that brought me back to the present and where I was. Enemy territory.

It rang again. I scooped it to my ear, keeping an eye on the door, wondering how long it would take for Big Nick's cavalry to show up.

"Yeah?" I made my voice gruff and careless like Big Nick's. On a hunch.

"Nickie! I'm so glad you're in. It's me, Dolly. Nickie, I'm scared." It was a girl's voice, soft yet hard with fear. I thought fast. Dolly. Dolly Warren. The featured blues singer at the club. Nick's club, the Blue Grotto. The lovely face on the show case display outside.

"Keep talking," I said. "I'm busy."

"Oh, Nickie. I'm just getting ready to come down to the club for my number when I happen to look out the window and, Nickie, there's a man watchin' my place! I noticed him this mornin' too." She was wailing like a sick kid.

She was scared all right. I had heard fear before and she sounded like she had a solid dose.

"Stay put," I barked into the transmitter. "I'll send somebody over."

"Oh, Nickie." She was moaning again. "I'm scared."

"Shut up, I said."

"Do you think it has anything to

do with that cop you had to get rid of?"

"You crazy canary, don't talk no more."

That's the way Big Nick would have shut her up. I never knew how I managed to keep the elation out of my voice. Right in my lap. She hadn't said it all but she had said enough. Later, I'd make her sing her head off in front of the police.

Dolly Warren started to mumble apologies but I cut her off. "Stay where you are. Be right over."

My fingers were trembling when I put the phone down. I holstered the .45 before I blasted Torrento right where he sat. Mike Peters' murder had hit me harder than I thought. But I needed more proof before I delivered the bullet to Big Nick.

I got out of the office, leaving him inert in the chair behind me. I carefully checked the long, low-ceilinged corridor. The hall was empty. The landing that led into the environs of the club showed no trouble.

Velvet was exactly where I had left him. Manacled to the railing, midway from Big Nick's private office. The strongarm man's eyes glared at me above the handkerchief wadded firmly in his jaws.

I retrieved the cuffs. Velvet tore at the gag and I let him have it again with the butt end of the .45. He collapsed without a whimper.

But my luck had changed. Coming over the landing on the dead run were a trio of shiny-haired men who

must have spotted the scene from above. One quick look was enough. They were Big Nick's boys and loaded for bear.

I raced back the way I had come as a hoarse shout went up and gunfire ripped the confines of the corridor. I snapped a shot over my shoulder to discourage pursuit. It did. There was a mad scramble of dress suits for sections of safety.

There was a large frame window at the alley side of the end of the hall. I'd come in that way. It could serve as an exit, too. The alley was about six feet down.

I had one leg over the sill, ready to snap off another shot, when a noisy, searing poker buried itself somewhere in my left shoulder. The impact of the bullet sent me flying through the wide opening and I fell the rest of the way. The alley bottom crunched like conch shells beneath me. Knives of agony shot up my legs, reached the burning shoulder and the poker throbbed like a pneumatic drill. Behind me, more guns crashed.

I jerked another shot upward and lurched down the alley toward the street. Hugging the wall, I half ran, half dragged myself to my car.

I had finally stopped one. After years in the war and one police battle after the other, I had finally caught my bullet.

But all that was really unimportant; the only thing that counted was the bullet for Big Nick Toronto.

Dolly Warren was going to help me deliver that one.

She was gorgeous. Very gorgeous.

Milk skin, red mouth and dazzling blonde hair that had to be her own. But she was stupid too. I could see it in the off-color eyes when she swung the door back and peered suspiciously at me over a span of chain lock.

"Who are you? What do you want? I don't know you."

"Nick sent me, Dolly. About that call and the party outside your window." I had to fight to keep the agony out of my voice. The shoulder had become a throbbing fire. The bullet had gone right on through without hitting a bone but it had cost me more blood than a handkerchief could stop.

"You must be a new one. Come on in. I got the creeps I guess." The door swung inward as she drew the chain with a clank of sound. She had been obviously drinking and was still too frightened to make the effort at thinking.

I followed her through a tiny hallway into one of the most expensively furnished apartments I'd ever been in on Central Park South. There were rich, deep rugs scattered all over the floor, fancy *objets d'art* cluttering every inch of the place. Nothing matched. The extreme decor of a built-in bar in the living room wasn't lost on me in spite of my condition.

Dolly Warren plumped down on a mountainous divan of fluffy cush-

ions and poured herself a stiff drink from a chrome decanter. She looked at me as she swallowed her drink.

"Where's Nickie?" she snapped peevishly. "Why didn't he come? After all, I'm his girl."

I managed a weak smile. "Cops paid him a visit. Routine stuff. So Nick had to hang around to answer some questions. After all, he isn't running a civic center, lady."

She sneered and her beautiful face suddenly wasn't beautiful. "Funny man." A cloud shadowed her sneer. "You don't think their comin' had anythin' to do with— Say! What did you say your name was?"

I sat down with a short laugh, keeping my left side away from her so she couldn't see the stiff hang of the shoulder.

"Williams. Ted Williams. How about a drink, hon?"

I tapped the decanter so that it rang like a bell. She shrugged her bared shoulders and for the first time I was conscious of what she was wearing. A low-cut evening gown with a sash arrangement that accented her tigerish hips. I concluded it was the outfit she wore when she did her stuff at the Blue Grotto. She didn't have to sing in an outfit like that. I also concluded that she didn't know anything about baseball, the Washington Senators, or anything. The sky might be the limit, she was so stupid. Names meant nothing to her.

"I signed on with Nick last week," I explained as I might to a child.

"I like a big operator. And Nick's plenty big enough for me. I go for a guy who's not afraid of the cops."

"Nick's not scared of anything," She nodded so hard her golden curls seemed to dance. "When one of those guys get too close, he swats them down like flies."

"Just like this Peters copper, huh?"

"Just like that—" She stiffened and for a moment a flash of reasoning came into her blank light blue eyes. It was gone just as quickly. Her fright had come back.

"Never mind about that now. What about that guy beneath my window? Ain't you goin' to go down and see who he is?"

I shrugged my good shoulder at her. "What guy? Listen, I cased this place before coming in. If there was anybody hanging around before, he's gone now."

She flounced to the window and peered through dotted Swiss curtains. She whirled in disbelief. "He's gone! How do you like that? He's not there any more." She clamped her hands to her forehead.

I remained where I was. "What's the matter, gorgeous?"

She wrung her red-tipped hands.

"Nick'll beat my brains out for draggin' him up here on a wild goose chase. But I swear there was somebody—oh, I need a drink."

She had two before she came up for air. I watched her with no expression on my face but a silly grin

to hide the dull throb of the bad shoulder.

Dolly Warren was pretty drunk now but I let the drinks settle a while longer. I nursed my own drink getting as much good out of it as I could. It helped me forget the bullet hole.

"What's so funny?" She flung the question at me angrily.

"Just remembered a funny story a fellow told me the other day."

She brushed the curls out of her eyes. "Yeah? Well, don't get funny. You're cute but I'm Nick's girl and he don't like nobody to get funny with me except him."

"Nick's a pretty funny guy himself."

"Ain't he though? Just like a big monkey." She ripped out a sudden throaty laugh. "You're sharp, Ted. Real sharp."

She fell back against the mountain of pillows with a seizure of laughter. Deep-chested, gutty. hard laughter. I knew it for what it was. She was getting hysterical.

I got up, reached her, and took her soft arm at the elbow. I squeezed the flesh gently. Sweat wasn't making me feel exactly cool but I shook the feeling off. Dolly Warren wasn't in any condition to notice.

"Nick's sharp too, Dolly. Nobody should ever cross Big Nick," I said.

That sobered her up a bit. "You said it. Wait'll you're around with him a little longer. You'll see."

"I don't have to be around long."



Dolly. I read what happened to that cop Peters."

"Peters?" she simpered. "That's different. He was a cop and on Nick's back. He got too close to Nick's policy racket. So Nickie shut him up good." She made a cute expression with her face. I was grim, as she was singing her head off.

"I need a drink." I wasn't making conversation any more.

"Where's Nickie?" She was impatient again, rubbing her elbow with one slender hand. She stood up, swaying. "Wait—we both need a refill. This waitin' drives you nuts, don't it?" She lurched over to the miniature bar and ducked behind its shiny back to rummage for something. Reappearing with a new bottle, she filled our glasses to the brim.

I arched my back to ease the deadness of my arm. I slid the .45 out of its harness and pointed it at

Dolly Warren. She was bringing

back the drinks with drunken alacrity when she saw the gun in my hand.

Flinging her hands to her face, she let the glasses crash to the floor. The flush of intoxication and her natural bloom of health drained right out of her curved cheeks.

"Sit down, sister."

She sat down without a murmur, her arms dangling without control, her soft body completely spent. Her vacant blue eyes got a shade darker.

"You're not from Nick," she moaned.

"No, I'm not."

"You're a cop!"

I shook my head. "No, Dolly. I'm the friend of a cop. A very dead cop. Mike Peters. Remember him, Dolly?"

"No!" It screamed out of her.

"He was a very good looking boy before he met up with those black-jacks."

Half mad with fright now, she sagged on the divan, one long, love-ly leg trailing to the floor. She stared at me, her eyes wide pools of terror. She was a child who had just found out the Sandman was real.

"What are you going to do? I didn't have anything to do with it, I tell you."

I reached, grabbed a handful of her luxuriant curls and yanked her to a sitting position. She cried out with the pain of it and sat back gasping, her breasts heaving.

"Don't lie to me, Dolly. I want the whole rotten truth. Mike never

would have gotten himself holed up in a dark alley like that unless a beautiful dish like you had arranged to meet him there. That was Mike's weakness. Beautiful dishes. But it's not mine."

She tried to clutch my gun hand in a burst of mad courage but I didn't let her. My open hard palm flicked twice. Two angry streaks of red flamed her cheeks.

"I want it now, Dolly. A full confession. It's that or this toy in my hand goes off. Know what a .45 slug would do to your face at this range?"

"Don't," she blubbered. "Not that. Honest, you got me all wrong. I never—"

She halted suddenly and the swift flash of relief that flooded her eyes made me freeze where I stood. I didn't turn or bat an eyelash. I'd forgotten about the front door. My burning shoulder and my blind anger had made me forget a lot of things.

"Don't move or you're a dead man," somebody behind me said in a voice that had no emotion at all. A door slammed shut violently and footsteps slithered in the foyer.

I spread my hands. The automatic fell to the rug. There wasn't anything else to do now. I waited. Dolly Warren rushed forward, crying.

"Get around, don't you, Eddie?" I didn't have to turn around to know that Big Nick Torrento had put two

and two together and come up with a fast, workable four.

They moved into the room from the fancy foyer. Big Nick Torrento, a battered looking Velvet and another hood whose face was new to me but his expression wasn't. They all had their hats on and the pair flanking Big Nick also had guns.

Torrento's face was a flabby mask of anger and Velvet was fairly licking his thin lips. The third man just kept his gun pointed at my head.

"Three to one, Nick? It hardly seems enough."

"Eddie, this was one hunch of mine that paid off. I was wondering what held Dolly up. Frisk him, Velvet."

Dolly was blubbering in Nick's arms. "Oh, Nickie, he hit me an' he was asking me all kinds of questions!"

They were all in front of me now and Nick was glaring. His face was livid. "Rough stuff, is that it? You're a little too free with your hands, Eddie. Go ahead, Velvet."

I knew what was coming but I couldn't get out of the way.

Velvet cackled and kned me from behind. I doubled up and he came back with a bony fist that slammed me to the floor. I fell like a beat-up rug, the blood spinning in my head, red-hot rivets hammering away at the shoulder again. The floor swam in front of me. The point of something, it felt like Dolly Warren's high-heeled weapon, dug into my side. I tasted blood again.

"Hold it," Torrento's voice sounded above me. "That's enough for now." Big Nick sounded far away. "Get some water, Dolly. I want to talk to him."

Water exploded in my face. I opened my eyes. I raised myself to one knee, holding back a groan. I tried a grin through my split lips.

"You boys don't really have to show me all this kindness," I muttered. Velvet's big hands helped me the rest of the way, shoving me roughly on to the divan.

Big Nick had one of his fat cigars going. His tiny eyes were shining with grudging admiration.

"You're tough, Eddie. I'll say that much for you. But I hate cops who get too close to me. Even ex-cops. Big Nick is paying for your last ride."

"I figured that, Nick."

Velvet suddenly looked surprised. "He's got lead in him now, boss. The boys did better than they thought."

"See, shamus?" Big Nick said. "Mess around us and you get hurt."

Blood and pain made me hold my teeth together. "Mike Peters got hurt too, Nick."

Torrento shook his thick head. "Got a one-track mind, you have. Yeah. Mike Peters. Your friend. He got close. Too close. So I pushed him out of the way. Dolly made that one easy. Once he caught her act, he was as good as dead."

I felt the blood pound in my skull. My left arm was useless now. Like

I'd slept on it all night. Only bitter hate kept me going. Hate and the picture of Peters lying in an alley with his face all caved in. That and this lovely, stupid wench who had led him on with a kiss and a promise.

"I got news for you, Nick." It was my last card coming up. The only one left in a badly misplayed hand. "Mike died but he had his fun before he went."

Torrento grunted, his eyes narrowing. Velvet growled.

"What does that mean?"

"Dolly let him have some fun. Her own brand, the brand you know so well. Mike went out the way every red-blooded guy would like to go when they die. One last fling with a beautiful broad. You know what I mean."

I let that sink in, fighting to clear my head. Forcing a smile, I winked. That was too startling for their single-gauge intellects. Wounded, beaten men just don't wink and joke. Especially a man who is about to die.

Dolly Warren paled. The color left her face with the enormity of the lie.

Nick Torrento scowled. "Say it in English, Noon."

"Want me to use four-letter words in front of a lady? Mike and Dolly made love before he got killed—"

"Want Velvet to kiss you again, shamus?" Big Nick snarled. "Lay off that kind of talk! It won't buy you a thing!"

"That's just it, Nick. It won't. So I'm telling you for nothing. Go ahead. Ask her yourself."

Dolly Warren was no angel. But she was Nick Torrento's girl. Big Nick was shrugging his shoulders in contempt, willing to let it go at that, but not Dolly. Her meal ticket and her well-being were on the line.

She forced her way between the guns and glared down at me. Her blue eyes had tiny specks in them. Red specks of uncontrollable anger.

"You cheap, no-good excuse for a man! Sayin' things like that about me!" She moved in closer, her lithe body weaving in the evening gown. "I hope they cut out your rotten tongue. I want Nick to have your arms and legs pulled off, one by one! I want to see—"

It was what I had hoped for.

For split seconds she was between me and the guns in their hands. It was probably my last chance.

My foot came up with all the speed and force I could muster and everything I had left was wrapped up in it. With all the nerves and muscles in my body alive with pain. I rocketed her back the way she had come.

Dolly Warren's surprise and fright made windmills of her arms. She flailed wildly at Velvet and the third gun in the room. Her sudden weight sent them spinning backward, their guns falling. Big Nick started forward with a hoarse shout of warning, one fat hand clawing for a weapon. But the hand I had dam-



aged in the office was slow. I had time to recover.

I rolled to the carpet, my fingers closing fast on Velvet's sleek-barreled .38. I came up with it, spitting fire and noise, feeling a mad wave of exultation surging over me.

Velvet had pulled another gun from his coat pocket but not in time. He made a face as my slug thudded into his chest, then his mouth sagged and he crumpled like wet newspaper to the floor. His crony scrambled desperately for the cover of the built-in bar. He had another gun now too. I could see it was my own .45.

Big Nick had grabbed Dolly Warren. She squirmed in his arms as his meaning got home to her. They reeled in a curious dance of self-preservation as the hood behind the bar opened fire.

A slug tore a hole in the floor near my thigh. I maneuvered behind the divan. The lights of the

room were changing like kaleidoscopes in front of me. I fought to keep my head and eyes clear. I was close to blackout.

I could hear Dolly Warren screaming and kicking to get free of her bear-like captor.

The hood behind the bar didn't see me prop myself on the arm of the divan, sight carefully and squeeze off three rounds. I raked the length of the bar. There was a strangled cry of surprise and a pair of trousered legs flopped into view from one corner of the thin-walled bar. I had estimated its solidity perfectly. The hood hadn't. He joined Velvet in oblivion.

My eyes swung back to Dolly Warren and Nick Torrento.

Toward their struggling, contrasting figures, Dolly, beautiful in her strapless, skin-tight gown. Big Nick, massive and dark in his full dress clothes. I cocked the gun, ready for the slightest opening. It never came.

The hall door was swinging inward again.

There were men in plainclothes, a flash of blue uniforms. I staggered erect as I spotted Lieutenant Drum. But they had come too late, also. For somebody.

There was a roar and a shot. Dolly Warren and Nick Torrento broke apart like dancers who have reached the end of the waltz. A gun thudded to the floor in the sudden stillness. Big Nick Torrento stared at Dolly Warren foolishly, then looked down at the widening red stain

on his white shirt front. He giggled. A short, bubbly giggle. Dolly Warren moaned.

Nick Torrento crawled to the floor suddenly and curled up in a bulky heap at her feet.

The whites of Dolly Warren's eyes rolled up and her breath-taking figure sank down beside him. Then the shouting and movement started all over again. I heard Drum bellowing something.

That was all I saw because I fainted myself . . .

We were alone in Drum's office when the red-headed lieutenant of detectives let me have it with official scorn.

"You ex-cops are all alike! Think you can handle everything by yourselves. Why the hell didn't you tell our man Stone what you were up to? He'd been watching the dame's place since Peters got it. Did you think the department was asleep on the job?"

I lifted the clean white sling on my arm. "This was personal, Red. I thought you'd understand."

Drum's face got redder than his hair. "Sure, I understand. I've got some friends too. But this was a police case. And there are police methods, in spite of your peculiar ideas on the subject. You should have known better. We had Torrento in mind too. Peters had been assigned to his policy racket to get the evidence that would put him where he belongs."

I shook my head. "I wasn't counting on Big Nick having time to use a smart lawyer. This was the only way, Red. I'm sorry Dolly Warren beat me to it."

"Be glad she didn't miss." Drum pounded the desk. "I oughta grab your license for this. As a former cop you should have known better."

I stood up. He had iced me good and I didn't like it. "Is that all, lieutenant? My arm's starting to bother me."

Drum's freckled face broke into an exasperated smile. "Ah, get the hell out of here. I never could talk any sense into you. Go ahead. Be a private cop. Use a gun to win your argument. But don't expect any help from me."

At the door I turned. I owed him an explanation.

"Red, I know vendettas went out with gaslights but this was one time I couldn't turn the other cheek. If Big Nick was still alive, there'd still be a bullet for him. I don't give a damn about your feelings or the department's feelings; I'd still want to deliver it."

Drum said nothing but his expression had softened. He reached into his desk drawer and came up with a bottle with a bright label. He drew two shot glasses from a cabinet behind him.

"You intellectual gunmen make me sick," he said tiredly. "Come on back here, Ed. Let's drink a toast. To a swell cop. Mike Peters, your friend, *and mine.*"



THE LOSING PERCENTAGE

by
JEFFREY M. WALLMANN

Live it up, little lady. Live it up to the hilt. Because one of these nights the dice will come up snake eyes — maybe a lot sooner than you think.

THE STRIP IN Las Vegas is like a woman. Night time is her best time, but she's willing any time. She's painted and you're not sure what's underneath until it's too late, and even then it doesn't do any good. You still come back for more. And end up with less.

It had taken Sam Culp a while, but eventually he had ended up with nothing.

Well, not quite nothing. He still had his room in the Lucky Nugget, the casino in which he was gambling, and the return half of his plane ticket, and five chips. Five five-dol-

lar chips were in the tray beside him, and he fingered them as he leaned against the crap table.

"Get your bets down," the croupier said as the stickman passed the dice to Culp.

Culp placed three chips on the Come line and threw the dice. C'mon, he said to himself. A point. Any point. I'm not even asking for seven or eleven, just a — the dice rolled back from the back board. Snake-eyes.

"Two crap and a loser," the croupier said unemotionally.

Culp shook his head and the

stickman moved the dice to the fat man on Culp's right, who grinned broadly at him. Culp picked up his remaining two chips and turned away.

"That's it, Liz," he said to the brunette at his elbow.

"A shame," she said. "A real shame."

"Yeah, sure," he replied. "Let's have a cup of coffee."

They walked across the heavily carpeted floor, arm in arm. The girl tried to smile at Culp, but it didn't work. Losers don't need smiles. There was pity in her eyes, and Culp saw it there and wondered how deep it went. She was a Las Vegas woman, so Culp figured it went about as deep as an inch or so. The depth of an eyeball.

Which was too bad, he thought, because he liked Elizabeth Skinner. Liz was a cocktail waitress at the Sneaky Pete, a place catering to the locals just off the Strip.

She had made it clear to Culp right from the start that she lived in Vegas for the action and that some day she was going to bag herself a winner. In the meantime she'd tag along with a guy if she liked him—until he turned out to be a loser. Riding a loser, she had told him, made you a loser as well. The disease is catching.

Three days ago, when he'd hit Vegas and met her, it hadn't mattered to him. Now it did, but it was too late. Culp had been a loser almost from the start. He played craps

well, having grown up cube rolling in the alleys of Baltimore and having been an Army shooter through most of Korea.

But there's still a 1.4 percent advantage for the house at best in Vegas, and that losing factor had worn him down. He had dropped two thousand dollars of hard-earned vacation savings, and in a few minutes he'd be losing Liz.

It had been her eyes. She was tall and slender, with good hips and firm breasts, and her legs were good, too. Her nearly perfect oval face was cameoed by her hair, and she had full lips and a nose that she wrinkled slightly when she laughed.

Culp was an eye man, believing that they told all, and that the softer and more innocent they seemed to be, the harder the girl was inside. Liz had the softest and most innocent eyes he had ever seen. Even if she hadn't told him what she thought of losers, he had judged the same by her eyes.

The crap tables were along the hall between the lobby and the rest of the casino. The slots were after that, wisely grouped in front of the escalator to the mezzanine convention hall, which at the moment was full of exhibits and salesmen celebrating some National Electronics Week or another. Then came the wheels and the elevator to the tower, which rose fifteen floors and was solid neon on the outside.

At the end were the doors to the

street and to the swimming pool area, and the restaurant.

Liz paused beside a bank of fifty cent, three reel slots. "Sammy—" she said tentatively.

Culp shook his head.

"No," he said tightly. "The fun's over."

She pursed her lips but followed.

The restaurant was garish, but so was the rest of the Lucky Nugget. It was chrome and plastic walnut and pseudo leather in the casino's colors of salmon and turquoise. Culp and the girl sat down in a booth near the entrance and ordered coffee, and she asked if there was enough to have a piece of pie, to which he said yes. Culp lit her cigarette and took out his remaining cigar, wondering if he should smoke it as it would be the last one before he returned home.

He put it in his mouth. Might as well finish everything at once and get it over with.

They sat in silence, even after the coffee came, looking at everything except each other. Culp rolled the cigar around in his finger and admired its firm ash. It was a good cigar.

He said at last: "Thanks, Liz. You've been wonderful."

She cocked her head to one side and smiled a real smile. "That's the first compliment you've given me, Sammy."

"Well, I mean it."

"All the other guys I've known are always buttering me up, when

they're not bragging about what big wheels they are. You hardly talk at all. I like that."

"I'm sort of quiet," he admitted.

"That's for sure. I still don't know where you're from or what you do, and that's the first things I usually hear." She laughed nervously, as though it didn't matter where Culp came from or what he did.

Culp could tell it did matter. He didn't know why it did, but the seriousness was there underneath the laugh. He had avoided telling her on purpose. In fact, he disliked telling anybody he knew socially, especially girls he liked. But it was too late, and if she pressed, it wouldn't make any difference.

Liz leaned forward, now all serious.

"What *do* you do?" she asked. "I mean, you act like you were a crook or something."

"No, I'm not a crook." He drew on his cigar and then said, "I work for Western Maritime and Life, out of Hartford. I'm an insurance investigator."

"A detective! That sounds exciting."

It always sounds exciting, he thought to himself. He shrugged. "No, it's not. Just a lot of legwork and reports in triplicate and," Culp added a little bitterly, "a lot of snide remarks from people who don't like investigators investigating."

"Oh." Liz paused, and then asked, "Are you going back today?"

"I might. Might not. I haven't decided yet."

The waitress interrupted them, filling the cups. Liz Skinner studied hers for a moment.

"I'm sort of sorry you're leaving, Sammy," she said in a soft voice. It was so soft it was almost to herself.

"So am I, Liz."

She looked up at him. "Is that why you never told me?"

"What?"

"About being a cop."

"I'm not a cop."

"Close to one, then. About people not liking investigators. Is that why, Sammy? You were afraid I wouldn't like you?"

Culp didn't reply. He watched his cigar ash again.

"Well, I like investigators just fine," she said.

"Liz, I'm just another guy on vacation who's lost all his money."

"No, you're not. Not to me, anyway. You're Sam Culp, who's got blond hair and blue eyes and a broken nose and is over six feet tall and just the way I like them."

"I still lost all my money," Culp repeated doggedly.

"So you're Sam Culp the Loser, too."

"The loser," he agreed. It hurt.

She frowned, opening her mouth as if to say something and then shutting it again. Then she said, "Sammy, maybe you can answer something for me, you being a detective and everything."

Here it comes, Culp thought. It never failed once he mentioned his profession. It was worse than a doctor diagnosing ailments at a party. Either he was hated for being an investigator, or he was dragged in on some pet suspicion. Sometimes he was hated for both reasons. But at least it was a different subject than himself.

"Really?" he asked "What, Liz?"

"Why the fat man at the crap table wasn't fat." Culp raised his eyes ceilingward.

"Go ahead and look like that," Liz said, "but I'm telling you straight. He was wearing a pillow or something around his waist to look fat, but he wasn't really."

"Why would anybody do that?" Culp asked.

"Exactly. And another thing. I've seen him around in other clothes, too."

"A man can't go very long without changing clothes, can he?"

Liz shook her head. "I mean like disguises. Wigs and different kinds of clothes. I'm sure he was in the Sneaky Pete yesterday looking like a Texan cowboy with a big Stetson and boots and Levis. And he was thin."

"Liz, don't you think that—"

"You figure I'm crazy, but believe me, I'm sure. I look at men all the time. You look at women, but not the way I size up men."

"I know. To spot that winner," Culp said, trying to hide the sarcasm.

Liz's lips turned thin and white and anger filled her eyes.

Culp hastily continued, "All right, so what you say is true, but it still doesn't mean anything. Las Vegas is full of meatballs, and if he wants to wear a pillow, that's fine with me. I'm not interested in doing anything about a thin man who looks fat today."

"I never—" She stopped, her eyes on something over his shoulder. "He just came in," she whispered, and then the fat man passed the booth and sat down at the far end of the counter.

Culp studied the man. He had to admit that the man had thin shanks and legs, and for a moment Culp found his curiosity piqued. Then he mentally berated himself and turned back to Liz.

"What did I tell you?" Liz said.

Culp suddenly felt tired. He'd lost all his money, he was losing the girl, and he didn't want to argue. He said, "Let's go," and slid out of the booth.

Liz looked at him with exasperation. "I still say there's something very peculiar about him."

Culp let it pass. A woman needs the last word.

Liz lived in a decent but unspectacular set of apartments in the 4500 block of Rosedale Lane. Culp had the cab wait while he took her to her door. "I guess this is good-by," he said.

"Come on in if you want," she suggested.



"No," he told her.

"You can send the cab away and phone another later."

Again there was the doe-eyed look in her eyes. Culp read it and felt himself wanting to believe them, but he steeled himself. He would have liked to have gone in with her, would have liked to be the kind of man who could have and not been bothered afterwards, but he was Sam Culp. Sam Culp was a softie, and it would have been twice as hard to say good-by afterwards.

"No," he said. "The fun's over."

Liz looked down at her shoes. She had small feet and she wore nice shoes. "Come into the Sneaky Pete tonight, then."

"Liz—"

"I'll buy the drinks. Even a loser needs one for the road."

"Maybe," he said, promising himself not to. He kissed her on the cheek and stopped himself from putting his arms around her.

The cabbie dropped him in front of Caesar's Palace, which was closer to Rosedale Lane than the Lucky Nugget. He had to save money, and he wanted to walk, anyway. He passed the Sands and a series of motels and a wedding chapel and thought about Liz Skinner.

He thought some about the lost money, but mostly about Liz and about whether he should have stayed with her or if he should go back now.

He saw the fat man enter the Flamingo. He almost missed him, but one glance and he knew it was the same man. The trouble was, the fat man wasn't fat any longer. He was of average girth, and wore a light blue summer suit and a wide striped tie and his hair was black instead of the light brown of earlier.

Culp stared in through the open entrance of the Flamingo as he walked by, but the man was lost in the crowd. Culp continued, thinking of Liz again, and then he stopped and looked at his watch. He had nothing to do and no place to go and no money to spend once he got there. What the hell; it would be a way of passing the time, he supposed.

The Flamingo was air conditioned, a pleasant respite from the desert heat. Culp threaded his way

between the tables, and finally spotted the fat-cum-thin man at a cashier's booth, changing a hefty wad of bills. The man took his chips to the crap table with the most action and Culp stayed in the background and watched.

The man repeated his actions of earlier, making a few passes when the dice came around to him but mostly just standing there. After forty-five minutes, the man left the table, cashed in his chips and walked out. Culp followed.

It there was anything insurance work taught, it was to distrust inconsistencies. Inconsistencies were little actions which weren't right for a given time or place. As far as Culp was concerned, they meant that there was more to a situation than appeared on the surface.

The man repeatedly bought a heavy amount of chips, only to play conservatively. The other way around perhaps, if one was a loser, but most gamblers buy and play at about the same level. It was almost as if the man was gambling without any intention of really gambling, and that was an inconsistency. It stuck in Culp's craw, and whatever else he was, he was a good investigator.

The man returned to the Lucky Nugget and went directly to the elevator. He walked with purpose, and not with the aimless, seagull stroll of vacationers. There was a group of people already waiting for the car, so Culp had a time to catch up with the man. When the doors

opened and everybody crowded in the car, the man pushed the button for the eighth floor.

Culp hummed to himself and jingled his room key, 402, as he and the man got off together. He walked almost on the heels of the man, ignoring him as he unlocked the door to 811, and continued to the end of the hall. There he leaned against the narrow sill of the hall window and waited.

Two maids, one pushing a white metal cart, came around the corner at the opposite end of the hall. One maid parked the cart beside the first door, knocked discreetly and after a moment unlocked it and went in. The other maid did the same with the room across the hall. They both left the doors judiciously ajar.

It was a bad break for Culp. He knew hotel security well enough to realize that if the maids kept seeing him as they worked their way up the hall, they would report him as a loiterer.

At the moment they were out of sight, but they would soon reappear and Culp doubted that the man would come out of 811 in the next five minutes. He walked back to the elevator, descended to the main floor, and continued his vigil there.

Twenty minutes later the man strode out of the elevator. He startled Culp, for he reminded him of an operative Culp knew in Los Angeles. He was tanned, wore a yellow passion-flower sports shirt, robin's egg blue slacks, bright red socks, and

two-tone brown and white shoes.

The black hair was gone. Now it was pale, almost white, done in an inch long butch cut. He walked out of the Lucky Nugget, but Culp didn't tail him. Instead, he caught the next elevator up.

The maids were cleaning 808 and 809. At first Culp was disappointed, for he had hoped they would have been gone by then, but as he thought it over another idea came to him. He went to the end of the hall where the maids had come from and waited around the corner until 811 was unlocked and then he came back.

Faking inebriation is hard. Most people parody it, but after long years of experience, Culp was good. He never staggered, but he looked as though he was about to, and there was a slight frown on his forehead as he concentrated very hard on the next step. He slowly, almost majestically, walked into 811, crossed directly to the double bed, and fell across it. He sighed, wriggled his feet, and belched.

The maid, who had been in the bathroom cleaning the basin, took one look and left, shutting the door behind her. Not a word was spoken; none needed to be. House rules are explicit. No maids allowed in occupied rooms, and as far as the maid was concerned, Culp acted like the proper occupant to 811. So when he walked in she walked out.

Culp estimated he had half an hour for the search. The double bed

had a mussed look, as though it had been slept in for an hour, and at its foot was a large metal steamer trunk, the kind that stands on end and opens sideways. Inside was a complete wardrobe and make-up kit. The Stetson and boots were there; a half dozen wigs, including a skull cap. The black one Culp had seen earlier, were there; and racks of pants, shirts, and shoes. There were eyebrow pencils and lashes; mustaches and muttonchops, and a .38 Smith and Wessen snub nose Detective Special. Culp removed its bullets and replaced it, shutting the trunk.

The two grey fiberglass three-suiters were locked, which bothered Culp for fifteen seconds. Both suitcases were half filled with money, lots of it in assorted bundles of differing value currency, and nothing else. The bundles in one case were banded with red rubber bands and with green ones in the other. There was a supply of loose green bands, but the only other red ones Culp could find were in the waste basket.

The tags on the steamer trunk and both suitcases were for an M. Victor, in New York City.

Culp took one last look around and then left. He went to the coffee shop for a light lunch and to think over what he had discovered in M. Victor's room, and then he bought all the different newspapers in the lobby and read them in his room. He didn't find what he was looking for, so he placed a long distance

call to Al Simms, his immediate superior at Western Maritime and Life.

Simms didn't like accepting the collect call, liked it even less when Culp wouldn't divulge the reason for wanting the information, but fifteen minutes later he phoned back with what Culp wanted to know. Then Culp visited the Lucky Nugget's security offices and talked to its chief, a waspish, taciturn man named Edworthy.

He and Edworthy were waiting in Victor's room when the man returned.

Victor had his eyes downward as he opened the door, and he took several steps into the room before realizing Edworthy was in front of him. He never did see Culp behind the door.

"Vic—" Edworthy started, and Victor broke for the hall.

"Stop him!" shouted Edworthy, reaching for his pistol.

Victor kept his eyes on the elevator and the fire exit door beside it and ran like hell. Then he fell on his face. He twisted around and stared at Culp, who had landed on him in a flying tackle.

Victor kicked out and scrambled to his feet, and Culp hit him in the stomach, doubling him over, and then on the jaw, sending him staggering against the wall. Victor collapsed and slid to the carpet and sat there shaking his head while Edworthy snapped the cuffs on him.

The Sneaky Pete was like a thousand other cocktail lounges. It had



dim, indirect lighting; horseshoe-shaped booths with little round tables that wobbled; and a raised dais where a piano player was on for twenty minutes and off for ten. The one unique feature about the

place as far as Culp was concerned was its night-shift cocktail waitress.

Culp was moodily watching a beer sign rotate over the bar when Liz came over and sat down beside him. It was five after four and she was off duty. She leaned back and sighed.

"Want to go some place else?" Culp asked her.

"No, let me rest a minute. I'm bushed. What a night."

Culp ordered her a vodka collins and then went back to watching the sign go around. He didn't know what to say to her, or more precisely, how to put it.

Liz broke the silence. "I didn't expect to see you again. You stood up that free drink of mine two nights ago, and I figured you were long gone by now."

"No," Culp said simply.

"I saw in the paper about you capturing that robber. Didn't I tell you there was something funny about that man?"

"Yes, you did."

"Well, tell me about it."

"What's there to tell? It was all in the paper."

"I know, but tell me anyway."

Culp shrugged. "Well, the fat man of yours turned out to be an unemployed actor from New York whose real name is McCaffrey. He held up the Westchester branch of the Eastern National Exchange Bank last week and escaped with ninety thousand, four hundred and twenty dollars."

"That part I got," Liz said. "What I didn't understand was why he was in Vegas with all those disguises."

Culp had a feeling she did understand, but he decided to play along with her. He worried his ear the way Bogart used to do.

"Well," he said, "most banks have special packets of money on hand from which they've recorded the serial numbers. If they are held up, they slip this money in with the rest of the take. The robber is unable to tell which of his take is safe and which is hot."

"And McCaffrey knew this?"

"Certainly. The banks advertise what they do, figuring that it will deter a robber if he knows he can't spend any of his take without risking being traced. Most pros get around this by selling their take to a fence, receiving clean money in return, but a fence demands a large bite, usually a third of the take. McCaffrey thought this was too much of a loss to swallow. So he came up with another method of turning over his money and disposing of the portion which was hot."

"Playing craps has a smaller percentage of loss, is that it?"

"That wasn't exactly his idea. His system was to take a little of the money at a time, buy chips with it, and then cash the chips in at a different cashier's booth to make sure he didn't receive any of his money back again. He used the disguises and halfheartedly played craps as a cover so that none of the em-

ployees or security men would get suspicious of just one man's actions. You might say that his time, possible losses at gambling, and his hotel bill were his loss factor; a much better losing percentage than the third a fence would take."

"Now I understand," Liz said. "How did you tumble to him?"

"When he was at the Flamingo, it struck me that he wasn't interested in gambling, that he was merely exchanging money. When I saw the suitcases and the carefully divided money, I was convinced that was what he was doing. I tried to think of why a man would go to such lengths to make such a turnover, and the answer followed.

"I checked the papers, but there wasn't anything in them about a large robbery anywhere, so I called my office. They reported back about the bank hold-up in Long Island, and that was that. Therefore, end of story."

"Not quite, Sammy," Liz said. "I have one more question."

"Which is?"

"Why didn't you come to me sooner? It's been two days."

Culp held up his hand. "That's the best part, Liz. You see, I made sure that I was the one who brought in McCaffrey, just in case there was a reward. There was one, offered by the banking association, and I received it this afternoon by wire. One per cent of the total take; nine hundred and forty dollars and twenty cents."

He looked into Liz's eyes, felt their softness and warmth. "I said goodbye to you once because I was a loser, Liz. I wasn't going to come back until I could be a winner."

"Shut up," Liz said.

"We can start the fun again, Liz. First we'll go to some fine restaurant for dinner, complete with wine. You like wine? And then we'll try the tables. Who knows? Maybe my luck has changed and I'll—"

"Shut up!" Liz said again, stronger, her voice trembling slightly. Culp saw that there was a wet film over her eyes, but he didn't understand why.

And then he thought he did, and he turned back to stare at the beer sign again.

"Yeah," he said softly. "It was

a stupid idea of mine, of course. I'll never be a winner." He slid out of the booth. "Goodbye, Liz."

She put out her hand and stopped him.

"I have a better idea, Sammy," she said. "No gambling, no dumb old restaurant. Let's go to my place and I'll cook you a better meal than you've ever had before. And — maybe afterwards we could think up a better way of spending your nine hundred dollars."

Her lower lip began to quiver. "At — at least it was an idea, Sammy."

Culp stood looking at her for a long moment. Then he nodded.

"Sure," he said softly. "It's a fine idea, Liz." He slid back into the booth toward her.



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THE STORY OF NICKY ARNSTEIN

by DAVID MARZOFF

MINT MARK

*Greed and Murder had made their
unholy pact—against a frail lit-
tle man who dared to dream . . .*

by RICHARD DEMING

ABOUT FIVE P.M. the old man began thinking about what he would fix for dinner. There was still a huge bowl of venison stew in the refrigerator he could warm up, but he was getting a little tired of venison. There was also a two-pound package of hamburger in the refrigerator, but he didn't feel like a plain hamburger pattie, and it was too much trouble to make a meat loaf.

He wished he had thought of it early enough to thaw out one of the trout in the freezer. It had occurred to him while he was loading his breakfast dishes into the dishwasher, then it had slipped his mind again.

Maybe he was losing his mem-

ory along with his eyesight, he thought.

The musical door chimes sounded. His was the only house in the tiny mountain village with such a modern doorbell. He suspected, without really caring, that some of the natives regarded it as an affectation. But it was a symbol of one of the two things he had always wanted when he retired: nearness to the wilderness, yet all modern conveniences in his home.

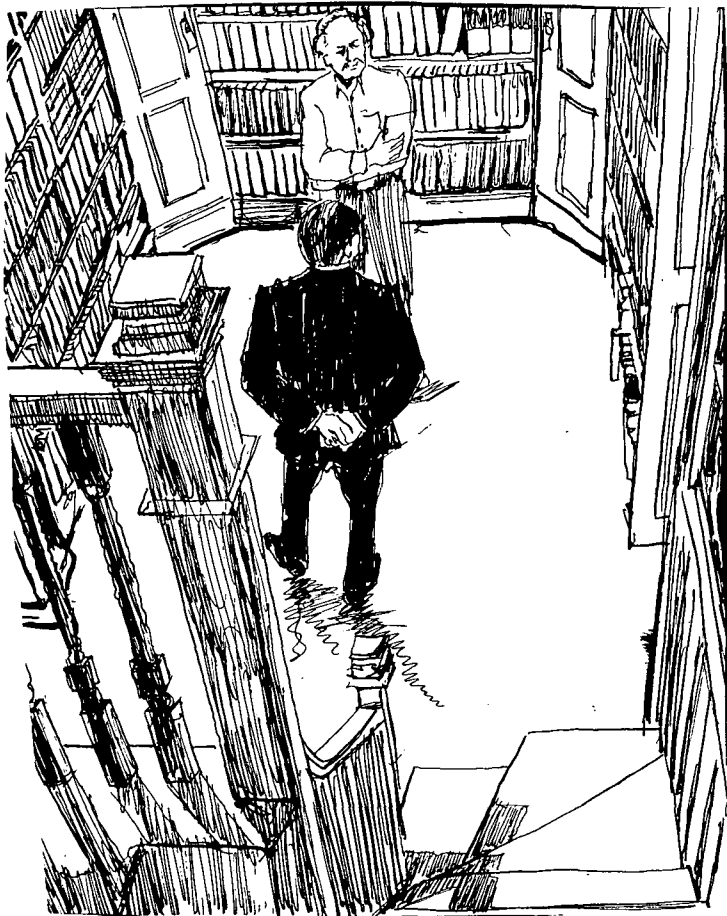
It was now ten years since Professor Franz Halbert had retired from teaching at the Marston Correctional School for Juveniles in California. It had taken him six months of constant searching to find exactly the place he had dreamed of

to spend his declining years. The search had been worth it.

There weren't many places that could meet his exacting requirements. It had to be far enough in the wilderness to remain undiscovered by Sunday drivers, yet still be connected to civilization by such

arteries as water and gas mains and electric power and phone lines.

Rainbow Gorge, Colorado, had qualified perfectly. Both hunting and fishing were available within walking distance of the village, providing you were a strong hiker. Yet it had all the piped-in and wired-in



facilities necessary for a luxurious indoor life. His little two-bedroom house had every modern convenience from an automatic washer and dryer to hi-fi stereo. It did not have television, and the only reason it didn't have that was because the surrounding mountains made TV reception impossible.

When the old man opened the door he found a tall man in his early thirties with flaming red hair and a black suit standing there. Although it was still a little chilly at the beginning of May in the mountains, he wore neither topcoat nor hat.

"How are you, Professor Halbert?" he said, grinning at the old man.

Franz Halbert peered nearsightedly through his bifocals at the visitor, but the man's face was only an unrecognizable blur. Then the red hair registered on him and at the same moment he saw the clerical collar.

"Blessed ecology!" Halbert said. "It can't be young Spencer O'Day, can it?"

The man in clerical garb laughed. "Still devising your own profane epithets, I see, professor."

"Not professor any more, lad," the old man said, stepping aside. "Actually it never should have been, because I never knew anywhere other than Marston where they called high school teachers professors. Anyway, when I wrote you to make it Franz, I meant in case we ever

personally got together again too, not just when you wrote. Come in, come in."

"All right, Franz," the younger man said agreeably as he stepped inside.

Closing the door, Halbert peered at him through his glasses again. "Without the red hair and backward collar, I would never in the world have recognized you, Spence. Last time I saw you, you were just a skinny kid. It must be close to twenty years since you and young Cooper took off from the reform school."

"Eighteen. Coop and I were both fourteen."

"Where Cooper is now, I have no idea," the old man said. "I've lost track of so many. He was caught and brought back when he escaped with you. But I've never heard a word of him since he was released four years later. He probably turned out all right, though, because neither of you were really bad boys. You were just mixed up because of your distorted home lives."

The red-haired man cocked an eyebrow. "I wasn't a bad boy? Don't you call bank robbery bad?"

"That was years later, Spence. And since you not only straightened out after you served your time, but became a minister, my statement stands. You couldn't have been a very bad boy, or you wouldn't have turned out as you did. But what brings you all the way from Michigan?"

"I'm en route to Denver for our denominational convention. The congregation offered me plane fare, but I decided to take a little of my vacation time and detour. I don't have to be there until tomorrow evening."

"Then you can spend the night?" the old man said delightedly.

"If you have the room."

"Sure, I have a guest room. Couple of times a year my nephew and his wife come to visit from California. You have some luggage in the car?"

"Just one suitcase."

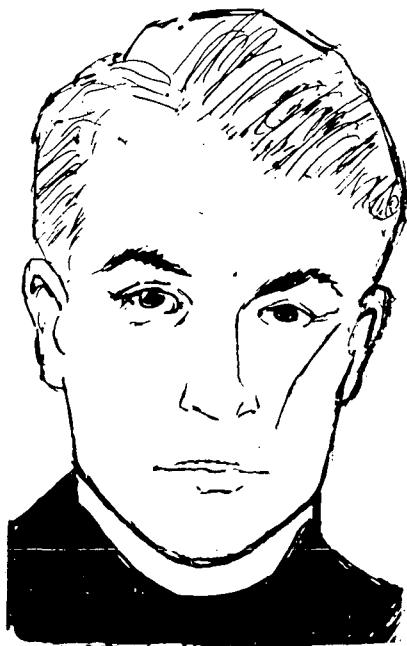
"I'll show you your room, then you can go get it while I start dinner. Like venison stew?"

"I don't know that I've ever tasted it. But it sounds wonderful."

Halbert showed his guest the spare bedroom, then went into the kitchen to start dinner while the red-haired man went outside to get his suitcase from the car. A few minutes later the younger man came into the kitchen and sat at the kitchen table to keep the old man company while he prepared dinner.

"You look as though you're in pretty good shape, Franz," he said. "The years have been kind to you."

"Only on the surface," Halbert said. "I still have all my hair and most of my teeth, even though they are turning yellow. But my eyesight is going. This stew is probably the last I'll ever make from venison I shot myself. I won't risk going out



next season. Likely as not I'd shoot somebody's cow."

"That's too bad. I know how you always loved hunting."

"Well, I guess I've had more than my share of it. I was seventy-five a couple of weeks ago. I can still see well enough to fish, anyway."

In addition to the stew, Franz Halbert served a tossed salad and thick-sliced homemade bread that he bought from a nearby farmer's wife. His guest was ecstatic over the meal.

"You don't find food like this back in civilization," he said. "City bread is full of air and artificial preservatives, and you can't even buy venison. Everything is delicious."

"It's just the mountain air makes you hungry," his host said modestly.

They concentrated on eating then, and had little more conversation until the old man poured the coffee. But then they pushed their plates aside and had their first real exchange since the younger man's unexpected arrival.

Halbert said, "There's one thing I kept forgetting to ask about when I wrote you. In your letters you never did explain where you'd been or how you got along those first few years after you ran away from the school."

"I hooked on with a carnival. It's about the only place they don't ask a kid a lot of questions before they hire him. I was a roustabout for four years."

The old man looked thoughtful. "I guess it was a couple of years after that before you wrote me that first letter to let me know you were still alive. I remember it was about two years before I retired."

"Yes, I was twenty then, and had just started my short-lived boxing career. You'll never know how much your warm, encouraging answer did for me. I was all alone in Detroit, except for a crooked manager and a punch-drunk trainer. And I had no relatives anywhere. I wasn't even sure you would remember me after six years. I was even a little afraid that if you did, you might send the cops after me.

I was so desperate for contact with

somebody who might show some personal interest in me, though, that I took the chance."

The old man growled, "If my letters were such a good influence on you, how come you started knocking over banks a year later?"

"Just plain hunger. By then my crooked manager had arranged for me to take so many dives, he could no longer get me any decent bouts, so he just walked out. Nobody else was interested in managing a fighter with a record of twelve straight K.O. losses behind him. I could have whipped any of the bums, but explaining that publicly would only have gotten me barred anyway. So my boxing career was over, I didn't know how to do anything else except carnival work, and there were not any carnivals in Detroit at the time."

"Well, fortunately you never killed anybody, at least."

"A matter I thank the good Lord for," the red-haired man assured him. "I wasn't much more successful as a bank robber than as a boxer, though, if you recall. They took me attempting my third. Perhaps Providence planned it that way, though. If I hadn't been caught, and hadn't spent five years in prison, it's unlikely that I would have started studying theology. Incidentally, Franz, I credit your letters while I was in prison with steering me in that direction."

"Well, I was really just trying to

straighten out your thinking. It nev-

er even occurred to me you would end up as a minister."

"I feel that I used my prison time well. By the time I got out, I had enough credits from taking extension courses so that it only took me a year to earn my degree in theology. And the whole thing is largely your fault. Just by being compassionate enough to care, you redirected my whole life, Franz. I'm eternally grateful to you."

"Aw, spoundaddle," Halbert said, embarrassed. "Most likely you would have found your way into the Lord's work anyway."

"Perhaps. But perhaps not, too. If you hadn't steered me toward God, instead of being an ordained minister, I might be sitting in some death row, awaiting execution, like poor Hank Timmerman."

"I felt bad when you wrote me about your former cellmate," Halbert said. "You wrote that you were trying to convert him to the Lord's way too, and you seemed to think you were making progress."

"I thought I was," the younger man said. "But it didn't work out."

"I guess he couldn't have been very sincere. He went right back to making his living with a gun the moment he was paroled."

"Yes, unfortunately. Even if he had done his stuff in Michigan instead of Illinois, he wouldn't be in quite such a desperate situation, because Michigan has no capital punishment. They still practice such barbarism in Illinois, though."

"Well, I have mixed feelings about capital punishment. Mostly I'm against it, but for some crimes life imprisonment hardly seems enough. After all, your friend deliberately shot down that old couple in the candy store when they weren't even offering any resistance, just to keep them from identifying him. Doesn't the Bible say, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'?"

The red-haired man frowned. "The advocates of capital punishment are always quoting that. But they distort the meaning of the passage. Actually it was meant to place limitations on punishment. That is, for causing the loss of an eye, the culprit was to suffer no more than the loss of one of his eyes, for causing the loss of a tooth, the same. In other words the punishment must never be greater than the crime. The law was meant to be compassionate, not vindictive. And elsewhere the Lord says, 'Thou shalt not kill.' He didn't exempt the state from that prohibition."

The old man looked a little sheepish. "I didn't expect you to agree with me. And I'm certainly not going to try to argue with you about the Bible. Have you ever seen Timmerman since you got out of prison?"

"I've twice been to Joliet to visit him on death row. I have a bit of a guilt complex about Hank, you know. I can't help feeling I failed him."

Halbert said, "From what you

wrote me, you made every possible effort."

"I did give it a pretty good try. I used to read him your letters, and he always acted as impressed by them as I was. He wanted to know all about you, and I told him everything I could remember over and over. How you were the strictest but fairest teacher at Marston. About how Miss Wilkins in the school office tried to get her hooks into you for years, but you successfully defended your bachelorhood. Even about your hobby of coin collecting. How's your collection coming, incidentally?"

"Right up to date. How about yours? Ever been able to afford that penny?"

When the younger man looked at him blankly, Halbert said, "The 1955 double-die Lincoln head you are missing."

"Oh, that. No, not yet. It's hard to accumulate enough money for such luxuries on a minister's salary."

"Well, you can look at mine after I've cleared the table."

"I'd like to see your whole collection, Franz. But first I'll help you with the dishes."

"Don't require any help," Halbert said. "I've got an electric dishwasher."

When the dishes had been scraped and put into the dishwasher, Halbert led his guest into a small, book-lined den where there was a desk shoved up against the window. By now it had grown dark, so the

old man switched on a desk lamp. In the corner of the right of the desk was a small steel safe.

The younger man watched as Halbert stooped and worked the combination of the safe. Aside from a few papers, there seemed to be nothing in it but a stack of stiff blue folders about a quarter inch thick each. Halbert set them on a corner of the desk.

"Sit there," he invited, indicating the desk chair. "You can see them better under the lamp."

The red-haired man took the chair. Standing beside him, Halbert opened three of the folders and placed them before him. Each folder opened into three sections, each containing twenty-five penny-size circular holes just deep enough so that when pennies were pressed down into them, their surfaces were even with the surface of the page. Clear plastic protected the coins from exposure to the air, so that even the oldest ones were still bright and shiny. Beneath each coin was printed its date and mint mark and the number that had been minted.

"There's your 1955 double-die," the old man said, pointing to a coin in the center folder.

As the seated man was examining that, Halbert said, "My Lincoln heads are complete to date. And all uncirculated, of course. I don't have any proofs, because they're too much trouble to get and too expensive. Uncirculateds cost enough, unless you get them as soon as they're is-

sued. Which I've always done with my coins."

"I didn't start early enough to do that."

"I started when I was thirteen, in 1909. Or, more accurately, my father started me by giving me these first four."

He pointed to the first four coins in the first folder, which respectively had printed beneath them 1909 *V.D.B.*, 1909s *V.D.B.*, 1909 and 1909s.

"I remember Dad told me he had paid two cents each for them," Halbert continued. "Of course uncirculated one-cent pieces aren't a great deal more expensive now, if you have yourself listed with a dealer to take one of every issue. Except for the rare ones, such as overstrikes. And even those are a lot cheaper if you get them as soon as they come out. My dealer has been charging me only five cents each for regular issues in recent years, which is cheaper than you can get them from the mint when you consider postage. What have you been paying?"

"The same."

"I guess it's pretty standard. So far there's 171 coins in the set, which I figure cost me about a hundred dollars, even with the premiums I had to pay for some of the rare ones. But recently I totaled up the value of each coin according to the Bible, and it came to nearly \$4,200."

"According to the Bible?" the seated man said puzzledly.

"The coin Bible. The Red Book. Yeoman's *Guide Book to United States Coins*."

"Oh."

"That's just the value if I sold the coins individually, of course. As a complete set it would bring another half that again from a dealer, and whatever you could get from another collector."

Closing up the penny folders, Halbert placed two other ones in the center of the desk and opened them. These were nickels, and there were only twenty-two to a page instead of twenty-five.

"Your buffalo collection, eh?" the seated man said. "What do you figure it's worth?"

"According to Yeoman, values of the seventy-one individual coins total over six thousand dollars. You can figure up to double that from a collector. Triple if I had the eight-over-seven, of course."

"Eight-over-seven?"

The old man gave him a peculiar look. "The 1918D, 8-over-7 I've been dreaming about for more than half a century." He pointed to the sole vacant hole in the first folder. "In 1920 I had an opportunity to buy one for fifty dollars, but I didn't have the money. Now Yeoman lists them at \$5,200."

He closed up the two folders and opened another pair of similar ones. These also were nickels, but Jefferson type.

"What's this worth?" the younger man asked.

"The individual coin value totals only about \$200. What do you figure your set is worth?"

The seated man looked up at him without understanding.

"These are all uncirculated, of course," Halbert said. "But you collect circulated coins. I've never totaled up their value from the Bible, because I don't have any. I just wondered if you had."

The younger man shook his head. "It's just a hobby to me. I've never been interested in their monetary value."

"You ever find that 1959S you need to complete your Roosevelt dime collection?"

"No, not yet."

There were only two more folders to show, one of Mercury dimes and one of Roosevelt dimes. Halbert explained that he had never saved coins of higher denomination than dimes, because the large coins involved too much investment. And he had never started collections of coins older than the sets he had, because the earlier issues of such sets had already begun to become expensive when he began his first collection in 1909.

To his guest's questions concerning the value of the two dime collections, Halbert answered that the individual values of the coins in the Mercury set totaled a little over \$4,300, but the Roosevelt dimes were only worth about \$70

Doing some mental arithmetic, the red-haired man said, "The whole collection totals up to over \$15,000."

"By individual coin value, yes," the old man agreed. "I'm getting \$25,000 in cash for it, though."

"You're selling it?" the younger man said in a startled voice.

"Why not? I've always regarded it as primarily an investment and only secondarily as a hobby. I want to take a trip around the world, and I'm getting too old to wait any longer. A collector from Denver will be here at nine tomorrow with \$25,000 in crisp hundred-dollar bills."

"Why cash, Franz?"

"My idea. He answered my ad in a coin magazine, and I don't know anything at all about him. I'm not about to take a check that might be rubber for a coin collection that took me a lifetime to put together."

"Well, I can see your point there," the red-haired man nodded.

Halbert put the folders back in the safe, closed it and spun the dial. He switched off the desk lamp and they both went into the front room.

When they were seated there, Halbert asked, "What time do you have to leave in the morning, Spence?"

"Oh, I don't have to be in Denver at any particular time tomorrow night. I'm only going to check into a hotel. The convention doesn't open until the next morning. I could stick around until mid-afternoon."



"Good," the old man said in a pleased voice. "Then you don't have to get up early. We can sit up and talk for a while."

It was eleven o'clock when they finally went to bed. Halbert asked his guest if he would mind his awakening him at seven-thirty, as he would like for breakfast to be out of the way before the coin collector from Denver arrived at nine.

"Not at all," the red-haired man said. "I'm used to getting up about then anyway."

When he closed his bedroom door behind him, Franz Halbert neither set his alarm clock nor undressed for bed. He simply turned off his light and sat on the edge of his bed for an hour.

At midnight he tiptoed from his room to the guest room door and

stood listening. When he heard snoring, he tiptoed back to his own room, donned a topcoat and hat and quietly let himself out of the house.

Approximately an hour later the old man's guest was rudely awakened by the ceiling light of the guest room suddenly turning on. Sitting up in bed, he started to dart his right hand beneath his pillow, then froze when he found himself staring down the barrel of an old-fashioned revolver. A lean, grizzled man of about sixty was pointing the gun. Franz Halbert stood slightly behind him.

Carefully bringing both hands into sight, empty, the man in the bed said, "What's all this, and who are you?"

"Sheriff Dale Potter," the man with the gun said. "Climb out of there now."

Slowly the red-haired man climbed from the bed. He had been sleeping in his underwear. He looked from the sheriff to the old man.

"What is this, Franz? I think I deserve an explanation."

The sheriff didn't give Halbert a chance to answer. He said, "No point in pretending any longer, Timmerman. I just finished making two long-distance calls. One was to Michigan, where both Mr. Halbert and I talked to the real Reverend Spencer O'Day. The other was to the warden of Joliet Prison in Illinois.

"We know all about how you got that preacher's suit. You left the

prison chaplain dead in your cell and walked out in his clothing. On your way out you also knifed a guard and stole his pistol. I imagine that's what you were reaching for under your pillow."

Gesturing the man to stand aside with his gun, the sheriff tossed the pillow to one side to disclose a .38 revolver under it. He put it into his pocket. He glanced at the shirt and ministerial collar lying on a chair, then back at the fake minister.

"Where's your suit?"

"In the closet."

The sheriff circled him to the closet, carefully keeping him covered all the time. The black suit was on a hanger. The sheriff patted its pockets before taking it down and tossing it on the bed.

"I'll let you get dressed before I put the cuffs on you," he said. "But you can skip the preacher's collar."

The escaped murderer sat on the edge of the bed to draw on his socks. When he had them on, he looked up at Franz Halbert.

"That stuff about a coin collector bringing you twenty-five grand in hundred-dollar bills was just to gain time, wasn't it?" he said sullenly.

"Of course. I wouldn't sell my collection. I plan to leave it to Spencer O'Day. I figured the prospect of all that money in cash would appeal to you more than having the coins, which you would have to sell anyway. I was pretty sure it would make you delay your plans for me until after the coin dealer had left

again with the coins. And those original plans had to be to murder me in the middle of the night and steal the coin collection. I realized that at the same moment it registered on me that you had stood behind me and memorized the safe combination when I opened the safe."

Hank Timmerman rose from the edge of the bed, put on his shirt and trousers, and slipped into his shoes.

"What made you tumble?" he asked.

"What made you think you could fool me?" the old man countered.

"I thought I was letter perfect. For five years I listened to Spence talk about you, until I knew you as well as he did. He told me every detail about you over and over, including that you had a hell of a valuable coin collection. You hadn't seen him in eighteen years, and you could have no idea how he'd changed."

"How did you know I haven't seen him since he got out of prison? It's been several years now, and you haven't been in contact with him since."

"Oh, yes I have," Timmerman said as he slipped into the black suit coat. "That was true when I said Spence had made two visits to Joliet. The last one was only a week ago. My escape plan was all worked out by then, but I was going to need a stake after I got out, and I thought of your coin collec-

tion. I asked him if he had ever gotten around to visiting you, and he said no, but you still carried on a correspondence. I figured a red dye job on my hair and the turn-around collar ought to be enough to fool you. Particularly since Spence told me your eyesight was failing."

"Oh, the disguise was perfect, Mr. Timmerman," Halbert assured him.

"Then how did you tumble?"

"Very slowly, I'm ashamed to say. Your first boners merely puzzled me. It wasn't until you made several that I began to get suspicious."

"For instance?"

"The very first was neglecting to say grace before dinner. I've fallen out of the habit myself, so it didn't occur to me until we were halfway through the meal. And then I was only puzzled instead of suspicious. I couldn't help wondering why, when I neglected to offer it, you hadn't either gently chided me, or volunteered to do it yourself. It seemed to me that most ministers would have done one or the other."

Timmerman made a face. "Spence wasn't a preacher when I knew him. I was imitating him as he was when we were cellmates."

"He also wasn't a coin collector then," Halbert said. "I got him interested in coins after he got out. So you didn't know anything about numismatics either. I couldn't understand you not knowing what I meant when I mentioned coin values according to the Bible. I recall

Spence referring to the Red Book by that name in one of his letters. Again I was only puzzled, though."

"When did you start getting suspicious?" Timmerman asked glumly.

"When you referred to my Indian head nickel collection as buffalo nickels. Either term is correct, but it happens that Spence always called them Indian heads. But what really tipped me off was when I mentioned the 8-over-7 Mercury dime, and you obviously didn't know what I was talking about. I suddenly realized you couldn't be Spence, because I had written him asking him to let me know if he ran across one at a bargain price. Just to make sure, I set a couple of traps for you."

"What?"

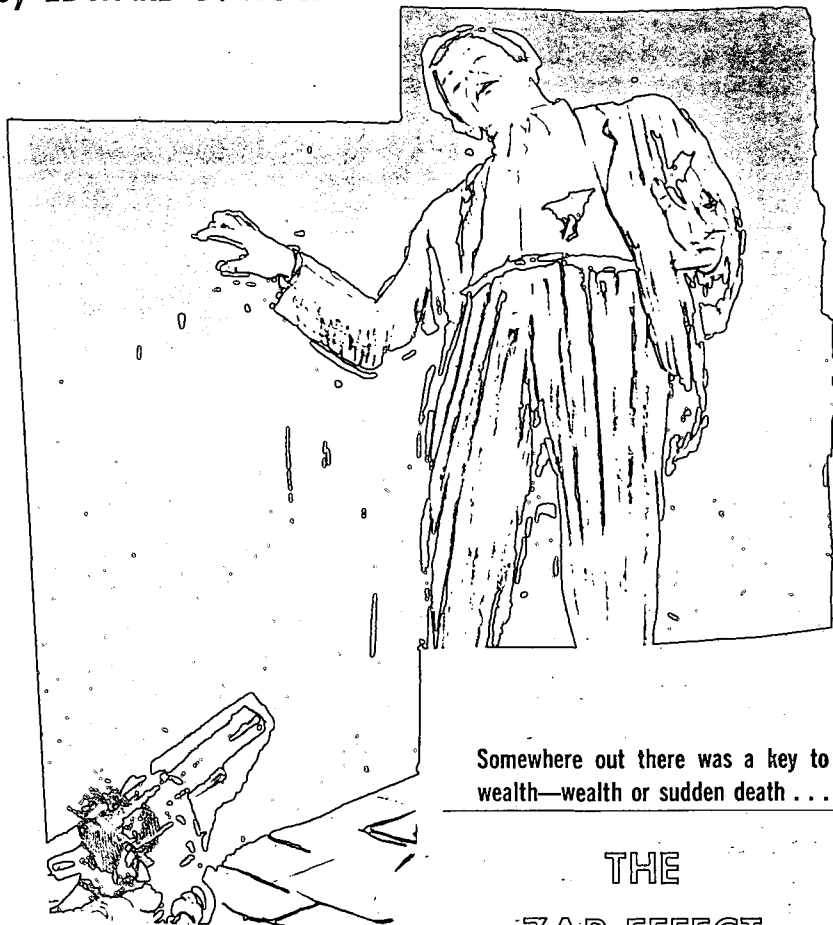
"First, I commented that you collect circulated coins, and you failed to deny it. Spence collects only uncirculated ones, as I do. Then I asked if you had ever found the 1959s Roosevelt dime you needed, and you said no."

"He wrote you that he had found one?" Timmerman asked sourly.

"Hardly. There is no such thing. The mint mark S means the coin was stamped at the San Francisco mint. There were no Roosevelt dimes made there between 1955 and 1958."

Sheriff Potter walked around behind the prisoner, told him to put his hands behind him, and snapped on the cuffs.

by EDWARD D. HOCH



Somewhere out there was a key to
wealth—wealth or sudden death . . .

THE ZAP EFFECT

SAMMY VENDOR was late that day. The form sheets had been delayed and it had been past noon before he began to make his rounds. This was always dangerous, especially on a Friday when the boys from the plant were feeling the af-

fluence of a bulging pay envelope.

On that day, his pockets filled with betting slips and cash, Vendor had to reach a telephone by two-thirty to lay off the larger bets before post time. Once he'd been five minutes late, and had taken a bath

when a regular customer's ten-dollar long shot had won by a nose and paid five bills.

Sammy Vendor hadn't planned to be a bookie. He'd come out of the army thinking about college and maybe even teaching, but he'd never had the ambition for a steady pursuit of any sort. He'd gone to live with a girl named Myra Blake, who'd since become a prostitute, and after that there was little chance for a future away from Banville and the plant.

At first he'd worked the night shift at the plant, running numbers in his spare time for a Cuban gambler named Ramon. But then Ramon went to jail and Vendor graduated into the big leagues. At thirty-four he was in business for himself, running the second largest private book on the street, servicing nearly half the boys at the plant, and laying off the big bets with a gambler named John, who was Ramon's successor. It was a good business. Most weeks he cleared better than two hundred all for himself.

This day he was late, and the May warmth had brought sweat to his brow by the time he finally reached the phone booth and called John.

"You're just a minute before post time," the harsh voice cautioned.

"Sure, sure. Take these down, will you? Is it my fault the sheets were late?"

After the daily phone call there

was always the waiting until the first results began to trickle in. He hated the big board rooms, with their unintended parody of a stock broker's office, and often as today he sought refuge in the 24-Hour Dinette, a shabby cafeteria which served as a sort of office.

And so he was sitting at a side table in the 24-Hour, sipping a fair cup of coffee and running over his bookkeeping, when Mick Mackey slipped into the empty chair across from him. "Hi, Sammy boy! How's business?"

"Is it ever any different? It's a living, that's all."

"Let me buy you another cup of coffee."

Mackey's rare generosity surprised Sammy Vendor, and he studied the chiseled gray features to find a reason for it. "Sure. What's up? Want someone killed?"

Mick Mackey laughed.

Vendor went back to his bookkeeping, deciding that Mickey would speak when he was good and ready. Presently, the gray man said, "The governor's coming to town day after tomorrow."

"So?" Governor Case, elected just last week on a crime cleanup campaign, was the biggest thing to happen since New York's Governor Dewey back in the forties. Less than six months in office, he'd already led a personal raid on a narcotics distribution center, visited police headquarters in a half a dozen of the state's largest cities, and put the

squeeze on every gambler, prostitute and grafter in the area. Crime was the state's biggest problem, and Governor Case, a vigorous forty-year-old lawyer with a beautiful wife and Sunday supplement family, wasn't about to let the voters forget it.

"The boys hate him," Mick Mackey said quietly. "Some say there's already a price on his head."

"Sure. Kill him and make a martyr out of him. Then where are you?"

"With a sleepy lieutenant governor who doesn't give a damn," Mick Mackey sipped his coffee and smiled. "Suppose when the governor comes to town Friday, somebody sets off a couple of sticks of dynamite near his motorcade."

"Count me out," Sammy Vendor said. "I'm a bookie, not a murderer."

"Hold it! Hold it!" The chiseled face came closer, the voice dropped. "I'm not talking about killing anybody! Listen, will you? That's why you're still taking two-dollar bets, Sammy, because you don't listen!"

"So I'm listening."

"Look, suppose a couple of sticks go off somewhere — low power, mostly noise and smoke. What would happen in a town like this? I'll tell you what would happen — every copy in the county would go storming over there." He paused dramatically. "And then — zap!"

"Zap?"

"Zap! We knock off the Friday payroll at the plant."

Sammy Vendor stared at him in silence, wondering if the man was serious, knowing almost at once that he was. Finally he said, "I don't want no part of that."

"But I need you, Sammy!"

"For what?"

Mick Mackey glanced around, checking the nearest occupied tables. There was still no one within earshot. "Look. You go into that plant every day just after noon to pick up your bets. The guards all know you, and everybody looks the other way when you come along. And that's what I need, just one man on the inside at payroll time."

"You're pulling this alone?"

"I can do it alone with an inside man. All you do is plant a tear gas bomb near the pay window. It'll divert the guards at the gate, and throw everybody into confusion. I drive through the unguarded gate wearing a gas mask, scoop up the money and scam!"

"All without gunplay?"

"I'll have a gun," Mackey admitted. "But just for looks. That gas'll keep 'em busy."

"And where'll I be?"

"Long gone! You just leave the bomb in a paper bag and take off. Nobody'll know it was you left the thing."

"How do you get away?"

"The cops are all across town, remember?" He sipped the dregs of his coffee. "There'll be better than

a hundred thousand bucks in that payroll, Sammy. I'll cut you in for a third of what I get. How about it?"

"I'm a bookie, Mick. I'm no robber. I never did anything like this." He stared down at his hands. "Not with a gun."

"So who's using a gun? Me, not you! Hell, you'll be miles away by the time the tear gas goes off. And you'll be maybe fifty thousand bucks richer."

"And if something goes wrong?"

"I'm the one who takes a dive, not you. You're clear."

"Let me think about it," Sammy Vendor found himself saying, surprised to find he was even considering the offer. "I'll see you here tomorrow."

"Don't let me down, boy. It'll be too late to get somebody else."

"I'll think about it," Vendor repeated, and left the table. He'd walked for three blocks before he remembered to check the results of the first race.

Except for weekends, Vendor usually spent his evenings at the Blue Harem, an old-line Greek restaurant that had recently gone Arabian, complete with fezzes for the orchestra and a bevy of brunette belly dancers, some of them imported all the way from New York, according to the proud boasts of the management. One of the girls, whose dancing name was Shando, was a special friend of Vendor's.

He usually stood at the bar until

the show began, then took one of the empty tables along the side wall. Shando was the second girl to dance, and she burst upon the tiny rollaway stage with orange veils flying about her, undulating her rhinestoned navel with special emphasis toward the front table full of tired business men types. She worked around them with carefully measured movements, staying just out of reach, then circled their table and came on to Sammy's.

"Hi, Doll," he greeted her, softly so his voice wouldn't carry. "Meet me afterwards, huh? At the 24-Hour?"

She gave him the merest nod as she danced by, flipping her perfumed veil momentarily over his face. He waited there till she'd finished her turn, then paid for his drink and left.

The 24-Hour was a different place by night, or maybe not so different. It was still a shabby cafeteria, and now the glaring ceiling lights peeked into every corner, revealing the dusty spots, the cigarette butts, the crumpled soda straws. The customers were always men in the early hours of the morning, and even Shando hesitated to venture inside unless she was meeting Sammy Vendor.

He was at a table near Doc Fees when she entered, watching the old man go about his nightly business of selling pocket watches from a velvet cloth in his lap. No one ever asked where old Doc got the watch-



es. In the 24-Hour after midnight, no one cared.

Shando's real name was Rosemary Cahn, and she'd come to the city after two forgettable years in a girls' college on Long Island. When Vendor called her by name, he called her Shando, because he'd never known her during the Rosemary days. Now, seeing her across the table with her long dark hair caught up in a demure bun, he found it difficult — as always — to connect her with the brazen dancer he'd watched an hour earlier.

"How you doing?" he asked, offering a cigarette across the coffee-stained table.

"Tired. One of those guys pinched me besides. What's up?"

"What do you say we blow this town?"

"Sure. You got the money, Sammy?"

"I might have."

"The horses must be losing these days, huh?" She didn't like him taking bets. But then, he didn't much care for her dancing in front of middle-aged lechers.

"I can make some fast money."

"Honest?"

"What's honest any more in this world? I'm asking you if you'd come away with me."

"When?" She sipped her coffee.

"Probably Friday night. No later than Saturday."

"I don't want people chasing me all my life."

Vendor thought about it. "Maybe we should stay for a week or so, just to make it look good." He was thinking about going back to the plant for bets after it was over. "We'd have to play it by ear a little."

"Do you want to do this, Sammy?"

"I didn't at first. Now I've been thinking about it all day and it sounds pretty good. It sounds like easy money, with not much risk. It sounds like a way out of being a bookie for the rest of my life and dying finally in a furnished room somewhere over a corner grocery store."

"I'll go with you," she said.

The next day he told Mick Mackey to count him in.

FRIDAY WAS cooler, with a dampness in the air that clung as a residue of an early morning rain. Sammy Vendor had to avoid the puddles as he hurried along toward the little magazine shop that distributed the form sheets.

They'd been late on Wednesday, and he had a terrible feeling they'd

be late again today, when time was so important to him. The boys at the plant would be getting their money just after the lunch hour, making their bets. He knew Mick Mackey wanted to move in early, but already the downtown streets were crowded in anticipation of the governor's visit. Noon was always a good time for political speeches, when lunch-hour crowds would stop and listen to almost anything.

As Vendor edged his way down crowded sidewalks, he glimpsed the governor's open car, completely surrounded by motorcycle policemen in white crash helmets. Governor Case himself would bob up and down occasionally, but the security measures were tight and his body was well screened. Vendor wondered vaguely just how much money the gangs would pay for his death.

But it was almost time for Sammy Vendor to be at the plant, time for Mackey's diversionary explosions that would send every policeman in town to the governor's side. Vendor gripped the metal lunchbox under his arm and walked a bit faster through the crowds.

"Early, aren't you?" the guard at the plant gate commented a while later as he strolled through. "Men haven't gotten their money yet."

"Getting an early start," Sammy Vendor muttered. "Want to take off for the weekend."

He walked past the gate and across the asphalt area to the plant proper, barely glancing at the little

barred paymaster's window in one wall. He saw one of his best customers studying the entries in the morning paper.

"How about it, Hal?" he called out to the man. "See anything good?"

"You're too eager today, Sammy. See me in an hour."

"Post time at two-thirty."

"I know, I know. See me after I get paid."

Vendor made a quick circuit of the building, past rows of die-stamping machines idled by the early lunch hour. The money would be in the paymaster's room, all in its little envelopes ready to be shoved through the slot to the waiting men. Most companies paid by check these days, but this was an old-line firm where the workers liked the feel of cash in their hands. Vendor liked it too. It went from their hands to his with ease.

He tossed the lunchbox into a rubbish can by the pay window. It was always there, to accommodate discarded envelopes and mimeographed announcements. Vendor had counted on it. The tear gas bomb would go off in exactly twenty minutes, and that was all Mackey needed.

The guards at the gate were listening to the radio. "What's the excitement?" he asked.

"Bomb went off near the governor's motorcade," one told him. "Nobody hurt."

Sammy Vendor voiced concern,

but his mind was elsewhere. He was thinking how well Mick Mackey knew his explosives. Mackey had held various construction jobs around town, always working with dynamite. He knew the right amount for any purpose.

"I got a bet for you," the guard said.

"I'll be back in a half hour. It's too soon now."

He walked fast, till the plant was out of sight around a corner. Then he lit a cigarette and relaxed for a moment. It was done. His part of it was done. Now he only had to collect the fifty thousand.

He knew he should have been gone from there, should have been phoning Shando and arranging for their flight if it became necessary, but he wanted to see it, to watch Mackey operate from a safe distance. He took up a position in a bar at the end of the block, watching over his beer until he saw the sudden puff of smoke that told him the tear gas bomb had been activated. Mick Mackey was a master of such things.

There was confusion at the gate, and the guards finally ran into the cloud, seeking to help. At that moment, an old black sedan rumbled forward across the street, crunching the wooden barrier before it. One guard turned gasping from the gas and tried to draw the pistol he carried at his side, but already the cloud of tear gas was sweeping wind-driven over the entire scene.

"What's going on over there?" the bartender asked at Vendor's shoulder.

"I don't know. Looks like trouble."

"I'd better call the cops."

Vendor went outside with the other curious customers. He knew it would take five minutes for the police cars to race across town to the plant. By that time, Mackey would have the money.

But where was Mick Mackey?

Again Vendor felt the urge to turn and run, but he could not. Mackey was in there somewhere with the money, part of it *his* money now.

In another moment a police car appeared, its siren slowing to a raspy halt. It was blocking the gate of the plant, and now there was no chance that Mackey could escape with his car. The smoke of the gas was clearing now, with employees and guards staggering blindly as they wiped at their eyes.

Sammy Vendor could see that the car was going nowhere — Mackey had driven it into the wall of the building, just to the left of the pay window.

"What happened?" he asked a guard, strolling to the gate as he did every day.

"Guy tried to get the payroll. You'd better stay out. They're still searching for him."

"How much did he get?" Vendor



"Nothing. He didn't even get through the door."

Vendor's heart was beating faster, and he was certain the guard would hear it. He turned away from the plant once more.

A messed-up plan. A crazy plan from the beginning. How could Mackey have hoped to pull it off alone? Now he was trapped somewhere in the vast plant, and if escape would not be too difficult, the fact remained that the plan had failed, the money was safe.

"Sammy! What's good in the fifth at Big A?"

Vendor heard the question, but he kept walking. He was still walking a block away when he saw the motorcade, the white-helmeted police, the open car. Governor Case at the scene of the crime.

Zap! That was what Mick Mackey had said.

Sammy Vendor turned in his tracks, seeing the photographers with their clicking cameras, the police, the plant guards. And Governor Case, leaving his auto to inspect the robbery car.

Yes, Case the crime-buster. Case leading the narcotics raid, Case with a price on his head.

Zap. They were going to get Case now. Unless—

And then Vendor was running, shouting and waving his hands. "Get away from the car! Away from the car! It's a trap!"

He was too close when the explosion came, blasting the black sedan into a million pieces, sending jagged bits of metal to pepper the landscape like machine gun fire. He was too close, and he felt them hit, tearing into his flesh.

Late that evening the 24-Hour was almost empty as Sammy Vendor sat at the table against the wall, waiting for Shando to join him after the last show. Even Doc Fees with his watches was missing tonight, as if he'd been told to stay away. Vendor felt the tightness of the tape along the side of his chest, and wished that Shando would hurry.

But when the street door opened, he wasn't really surprised to see that it was Mick Mackey. This was the way it had to end, and this was the place for that ending.

"Hell, Mick, you should have told me what was up!" Sammy Vendor

waved his hands helplessly. "When I tumbled to it, that the trunk of the car was full of dynamite, I just had to do something. How'd you set it off, Mick, by radio waves?"

"I was nearby. I knew he'd come, he always comes to things like that. Good politics, lots of pictures. The big crime fighter. I had it all figured. The fake explosion, then the fake robbery. Everyone lulled into a false sense of security. Then I mingle with the crowd at the plant and when he gets close up to the car for a picture or something I send out a radio signal and up goes two hundred sticks of dynamite. Even if he wasn't too close I would have gotten him — except for you."

"My chest and legs are all cut up, Mick, if it makes you feel any better. And six people are still in the hospital."

"But not Governor Case."

"How much were they paying you, Mick?"

"Plenty."

"Fifty grand? A hundred?"

Mick Mackey brought out the gun

then. "I'm going to kill you, Sammy. Nobody ever double-crosses me."

"You double-crossed yourself, Mick. I voted for the governor in the last election."

Sammy Vendor felt the pain in his chest and legs, and waited for the bullet he knew would come. It didn't really matter about him now. The police were outside and they'd have Mackey in another minute.

"I'm just a bookie, Mick. I tried to tell you that. I never wanted to be anything more." Sammy Vendor closed his eyes.

It was then that Mick must have heard the police coming in behind him. They couldn't have reached him in time, or shot him, before his bullet crashed into Vendor's chest. But in that final second it was Shando, coming in unnoticed through the side door, that knocked Mick Mackey's gun aside with her purse.

When Sammy Vendor opened his eyes he was still alive and something was over. He wasn't sure just what. But cops were everywhere.

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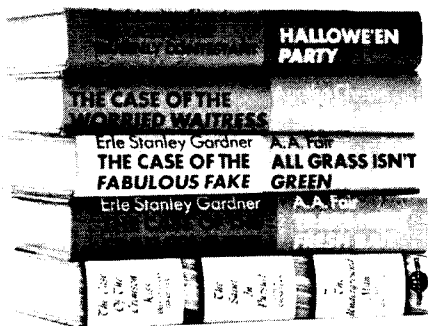
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